Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
7
Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Daybreak Rondo

It was indeed a chance meeting after several years. With the truth confirmed, Chloe drew closer to Rio enthusiastically.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

They were in the middle of training their spirit arts under Orphia's instruction. Aki felt impatience at the way the gap between her and Miharu increased every day, making her frown in disappointment.
"...I WONDER WHAT THE DIFFERENCE IS BETWEEN MIHARU AND ME. IS IT REALLY TALENT AFTER ALL?"

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Rio
A boy reincarnated into another world with the memories from his previous life. His current priority is to secure Miharu, Aki, and Masato's safety.

Amakawa Haruto
Rio's identity in a previous life as a Japanese university student. Miharu's childhood friend and Aki's half-brother.

Aishia
The contracted spirit that was sleeping within Rio. Apparently an upper high class spirit, but has no memories.

Ayase Miharu
Haruto's childhood friend and first love. Doesn't know that her savior Rio is the reincarnation of Haruto.

OTHER WORLDERS

Sakata Hiroaki
Young man summoned from another world as a hero.

Sendo Aki
Haruto's half-sister and Masato's stepsister.

Sendo Masato
Bright and honest stepbrother of Aki.

SPIRIT FOLK VILLAGE

Sara
Silver Werewolf Girl

Orphia
High Elf Girl

Alma
Elder Dwarf Girl

Arslan
Werelion Boy

Vera
Silver Werewolf Girl & Sara's Sister

Dryas
High Class Spirit of the Spirit Folk Village

KINGDOM OF BELTRUM

Celia Claire
Daughter of a count and Rio's former academy teacher. Currently in hiding as she travels with Rio.

Latifa
Werefox Girl & Former Slave. Reincarnated from another world and fondly calls Rio "Onii-chan."

KINGDOM OF GALARC

Liselotte Cretia
Daughter of a duke & President of the Ricca Guild

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Prologue: An Unexpected Encounter

On the western side of the Galarc Kingdom, on a road running through the forest to the west of Amande…

After the battle with the army of monsters that had attacked Liselotte's party had ended, Princess Flora was left staring at Rio's face in a daze.

Oh dear… A troubled expression fell over Rio's face as he received Flora's gaze.

And there was good reason for it: Rio had disappeared before, after he was falsely accused of a crime by the nobility of the Beltrum Kingdom. It wasn't as though Flora herself had framed Rio for the crime, but he had hoped to never see the royalty and nobility of that kingdom again, including Flora herself.

It's been years since I last saw Princess Flora. I've gone through my growth period since then. My hair is also a different color thanks to this artifact, so even if she suspects me, I just have to feign ignorance.

Rio did not lose his cool. He decided to maintain the air of confusion he was putting on in reaction to the staring from a member of royalty, tilting his head in question.

"…Is something the matter, Princess Flora?" Liselotte asked Flora curiously. Beside her, Duke Huguenot was also watching Flora with a suspicious look on his face.

When Flora realized everyone's attention had been focused on her, she shook her head in a fluster. "Huh? Ah, no, it's nothing!" Despite this, she continued to look inquiringly in Rio's direction.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

At this point, even Liselotte and Duke Huguenot started to suspect that that her odd behavior must have had something to do with Rio. The two of them looked at him.

Rio decided to speak up first, placing his right hand over his chest respectfully as he sank to one knee. "…Forgive me for asking, but have I possibly committed something of great offense? If so, please allow me to offer my most humble apologies…"

"N-No, you haven't! That's not it! It's not like that, no! It's — It's nothing of the sort, just…" Flora denied in shock, struggling to find her words as she trailed off.

Everyone present waited for her to continue her statement. After a pause, Flora opened her mouth fearfully. "Umm, I was just wondering if we've met somewhere before."

"…Me, Your Highness? I cannot say I recall such a moment, perhaps you have mistaken me for someone else?" Rio made a show of surprise and played dumb, sounding as genuine as possible.

"Oh, I see…" Flora frowned in frustration.

"…Hmm. Are you nobility from a kingdom somewhere?" Duke Huguenot suddenly asked, his words directed at Rio. He was curious about Rio's background, having been informed of nothing but his name. Based on Flora's statement, he assumed that Rio was nobility from somewhere, and so he tried to discern more with his question. If that were the case, then it wouldn't be strange for Rio and Flora to have met before.

"No, I am merely a traveler, wandering through the lands on a pilgrimage to train my sword hand. I am not someone born high enough to ever dream of being in the presence of royalty." Rio shook his head with a bittersweet smile.

"Oh? A swordsman of this skill, living secluded without any affiliation to a kingdom…" Duke Huguenot hummed with deep interest. "Ah, excuse me. As Liselotte introduced

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

earlier, I am Gustav Huguenot, just another old and useless noble."

"Even my estranged self has heard word of the great Duke Huguenot family before. It is an honor to be in your presence."

"Hahaha, I am most humbled to hear that."

"And I am too, for your most favorable evaluation of my unworthy skills." Rio and Duke Huguenot exchanged words in a friendly show of humility.

So this is that Stewart Huguenot's father… He sure seems like a typical shrewd noble, Rio analyzed.

The Huguenot family was the one he had the deepest connection to out of all the high nobility in Beltrum. Several years ago, there was an incident where Flora nearly fell off a cliff during an outdoor drill. Though he hadn't confirmed this for certain, Rio was fairly sure that Duke Huguenot was the one to place the false accusation on his head. Not to mention the fact he was also the main culprit behind Latifa's enslavement…

However, for some strange reason, Rio didn't feel any hatred toward his near-fated enemy, who now stood right before him. Of course, that didn't mean he wanted to get involved with him more than necessary — Rio was simply willing to use him if needed, then discard him without a care after. Rio had a different goal elsewhere, after all.

But Princess Flora and Duke Huguenot don't matter right now. Liselotte Cretia is what's important. That's right — Rio's true target was Liselotte.

There were two reasons for it: first, she was the daughter of Duke Cretia, the widely known lord of Galarc. Second, as president, she was the key figure of the Ricca Guild, famous across all the nearby lands.

It was definitely a wise choice to form a favorable relationship with Liselotte, just in case either of Miharu's friends — Sendou Takahisa or Sumeragi Satsuki — had been

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

summoned in the royal castle of Galarc as heroes. If things went well, she could be the bridge that connected him to them.

In that regard, while saving Celia's old friend Aria during their earlier battle was more of an indirect goal, it had also been a once-in-a-lifetime chance to befriend Liselotte. Although the undesired encounter with certain figures had been a little unexpected…

In the end, making contact with noble society would have opened the door to possible encounters with people from Beltrum later anyway — it had just happened now instead.

With the friendly smile still on his face, Rio repeated those words to himself. He had to reset his feelings and believe that this was his first time meeting Flora and Duke Huguenot.

"Umm, I should have introduced myself earlier. My name is Flora Beltrum. Thank you very much for saving us from that dangerous situation earlier." Flora eyed Rio's expression carefully as she thanked him with nervous diffidence.

Rio shook his head gently. "It was nothing. I'm glad to have been of help."

At that point, Hiroaki made his belated grand appearance with Roanna in tow. "Ah… Hey. Who is this guy, exactly? Someone you all know?"

When Rio spotted Hiroaki, his eyes widened faintly. He heard Flora quietly mumble the word "hero" and immediately knew who this boy was.

…He's younger than I expected. I believe they said his name was Hiroaki Sakata? Rio thought, recalling the name he had found out when he snuck into the estate in Rodania.

"This is Sir Haruto. He is not acquainted with any of us, but he saved us and now we are in the middle of thanking him." Liselotte said, taking the initiative to introduce Rio to Hiroaki.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“My honor to make your acquaintance.” Rio introduced himself, placing his right hand over his chest respectfully with a light bow. In the Strahl region, this was a formal pose that showed more respect than a bow to the other person. It wasn’t a gesture that an uneducated person would use naturally.

When Liselotte and Duke Huguenot observed this conduct coupled with Rio’s courteous manner of speech, they felt even more certain that Rio was no ordinary commoner.

Meanwhile, Hiroaki was looking Rio up and down as though to evaluate his worth. “Hmm… I see. Oh, I should introduce myself. I’m Hiroaki Sakata. The hero, technically. It’s nice to meet you,” he said with a small shrug.

“…I had heard rumors that a hero had been summoned, but I never imagined it to be true,” Rio said, feigning surprise.

“Well, it’s a little hard to believe, yeah. But I’m the real deal.”

“No, I would never dare deny that. It is quite an honor to be meeting you in person.”

“Really, now. Well, there’s no need to prostrate yourself in return. You seem to be quite the swordsman yourself. I saw some of your fight just now,” Hiroaki said cheerfully, apparently satisfied with the self-deprecating attitude Rio was taking on.

“You are much too kind. However, if the great hero was present, then my assistance may have been unnecessary. I apologize for stepping out of line.” Rio bowed his head solemnly.

“Hm? Ah… Well, yeah. Honestly, my hero ability is far too powerful for this kind of scuffle. Of course, it’s not that I can’t cross swords face-to-face with anyone…” Hiroaki said vaguely, a somewhat awkward look on his face. Even he was feeling some sense of inferiority at his complete lack of

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

participation in the earlier battle, but it didn't seem like he was willing to admit that honestly.

"Forgive my forwardness, but Sir Hiroaki's power is far too great. On such a small battlefield like earlier, it would have been difficult for him to moderate that power." Roanna said, immediately supporting Hiroaki's words.

Hiroaki nodded along. "Yeah, that's right. That's exactly right. One strike with all my might is pretty much the equivalent of a map wipeout. Oh, I should introduce you, too. This is Roanna, the daughter of Duke Fontaine."

"I'm Roanna Fontaine. It's a pleasure to meet you." Roanna held the hem of her skirt daintily as she gave a graceful bow. The girl who had been Rio's former classmate didn't show any particular signs of suspicion towards him.

"It is nice to meet you, Lady Roanna. I am Haruto." Deeming his disguise to be effective, Rio placed his right hand over his chest and greeted Roanna respectfully, then bowed to Liselotte's party around him with a faint, uncomfortable smile. "With everyone being of such high status, I'm starting to feel a little nervous in all your great presences."

"Oh, my. In the earlier battle, you stood against that minotaur with no fear at all, did you not? How could someone so bold before a monster so huge ever be nervous?" Liselotte giggled in amusement.

"Yes, that is true. The way you handled the earlier fight was splendid," Roanna agreed with a giggle.

"Yes, it was like the fight of a hero from legend," Flora said, nodding along.

"Hahaha, even I must admit the fight just now had my heart leaping in this old, weary chest of mine." Even Duke Huguenot echoed the opinions of the girls.

Hiroaki cleared his throat quietly. "Ah, ahem. Let's not keep standing around idly any longer. Our horse and carriage was blown away somewhere, should we move to the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

unharmed carriage instead?" he suggested, cutting the flow of the conversation.

"In that case, allow me to assist the others. It seems you could do with a helping hand," Rio offered.

"Lady Liselotte, do you have a moment to listen to a quick report?" Chloe suddenly said as she approached them timidly.

"What's the matter?"

"What shall we do about the carriage that was blown away by the monster? We were fortunately able to heal the horses that were sent flying alongside it, but the heavy damage to the roof and wheels makes moving the carriage a difficulty. We also lack the craftsmen to make any emergency repairs..." Chloe explained with a troubled look.

"I see. I wanted to use it for transporting the injured if possible, but..." Liselotte pondered worriedly. If she had been the only noble present right now, she would have immediately decided to give the remaining carriage to transport the wounded. But she couldn't do that with Hiroaki and Flora here. In terms of status, it was impossible for her to ask them to walk.

"Repairs may be possible depending on how bad of a condition it's in. By your leave, I could take a look at it," Rio offered. He had learned much of his do-it-yourself carpentry skills from the dwarves of the spirit folk village.

Liselotte's eyes widened. "Why, that would be a great help. If you don't mind, Sir Haruto, I would love to take you up on that."

Rio nodded readily. "It would be my pleasure. But I cannot guarantee I can fix it."

"...Haru...to?" Chloe murmured in surprise, staring at Rio's face.

"Hmm?" Rio tilted his head curiously.

"Chloe, stop. I apologize for my subordinate's rudeness, Sir Haruto."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“P-Please forgive me! You just had the same name as someone else I once met in the past.” Chloe immediately paled and apologized to Rio in a fluster.

Rio shook his head with a restless look. “No, I do not mind… May I ask where it was that you met that person?”

The number of people from the Strahl region that knew Rio’s alias of Haruto was extremely limited. On top of that, he recognized Chloe’s name too. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to remember.

“Answer him immediately,” Liselotte sighed. Chloe peered at Rio’s face as she questioned him fearfully.

“U-Umm, several years ago, at an inn in Amande… Did you, ah, have you ever stayed anywhere near there before? That inn was my family home, and I used to work there…”

Rio had only stopped by Amande once, several years ago: it was when he had run away from the kingdom of Beltrum with the false accusation on his head, on his way towards the Yagumo region. And there was only one inn he had stopped in at that time, all those years ago in Amande.

“…Ah, from that time.” Rio immediately connected his memories and widened his eyes in understanding. At the time, some drunk adventurers had picked a fight with him at the inn, so the memories still remained in his mind. But he had also encountered Latifa the next morning, so it was possible that was the clearer memory that endured…

“I-I knew it! You remember me!” With the truth confirmed, Chloe drew closer to Rio enthusiastically.

“Y-Yes, I believe you were calling out to potential customers on the streets?” Rio was slightly taken aback by the sudden difference in enthusiasm. Chloe nodded in excitement.

“Yes!”

I’m surprised she remembers. I remember hiding my face with my hood back then… right? That means this girl remembered me by just hearing my name, Rio thought in

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

awe as he looked at Chloe.

Unless they left a deep impression on you, it should have been a fairly difficult feat to remember the name and face of someone you only met once several years ago. But Chloe's mind had immediately jumped to Rio when she heard the name Haruto. She must have had quite the memory.

"Umm, you only stayed for one night back then, leaving right away in the morning…" Chloe spoke hesitantly.

"Yes, I believe I was in a hurry back then." Rio replied, looking back on his memories.

Ah, come to think of it… Suddenly realizing something, he looked at Liselotte. Back then, he had also bought pasta, grains, and other ingredients for his journey from the Ricca Guild. The girl who had welcomed him during that time seemed to bear a resemblance to Liselotte. Their hair color was the same, and their faces were similar.

Liselotte had been staring at Rio, so when their gazes met, her eyes widened. "Did you two really know each other?"

"Yes. My apologies… I became too engrossed in the conversation." Rio apologized immediately to Liselotte and the others. Though the conversation had led him that way, it was definitely not a preferable choice to leave royalty and nobility out.

"No no, please don't mind us."

"Indeed, we have witnessed a very interesting scene thanks to you." Liselotte and Duke Huguenot brushed off the apology easily. Having gained an information source in the form of Chloe, they were much more willing to set aside their investigation of Rio's background for now.

"You are all too kind," Rio said, bowing lightly.

"…Am I really mistaken, then?" Flora muttered to herself as she examined Rio's face.

Hiroaki noticed Flora's muttering and looked towards her. "Ah, did you say something, Flora?"

"N-No, it's nothing." She shook her head in a fluster.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“…Then I shall go and confirm the state of the broken carriage now.” Rio decided to head towards the carriage before the conversation could drag out any further.

“I shall accompany you. Hero, you should relax in the carriage with the others,” Liselotte immediately offered.

“Ah, well, I guess there’s nothing I could do anyway. Let’s go, Flora, Roanna,” Hiroaki responded right away, walking off without waiting for their reply.

“Yes, Sir Hiroaki.” Roanna immediately followed Hiroaki’s retreating figure.

“Umm, please let me hear more about you later.” Flora looked like she wanted to continue talking to Rio, but with a glance at Hiroaki walking away, she had no choice but to follow. With a quick bow, she turned on her heel and hurried off.

“Hmm. Then I shall check on the status of the knights. I shall leave that side to you.” Duke Huguenot left with those words, heading for the knights of Beltrum Kingdom.

“Then, if you would please, Sir Haruto. Aria, Chloe. We’re going.” Liselotte bowed at Rio before calling to Aria and Chloe beside her. The two of them responded with a respectful “Yes, my lady.”

Thus, Rio made his way to the broken carriage accompanied by Liselotte and her attendants.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 1: The Road to Amande

After that, the group made their way to the broken horse carriage.

The carriage had been blown into the forests on the side of the road, completely overturned upon itself. Furthermore, the iron plating on the roof had been completely dented by the stone great sword, while several detached parts — including the wheels — lay around the surrounding area. It made the entire scene look like a wreckage.

There were two horses that had been sent flying along with the carriage, but the attendants had already used healing magic to treat them and had led them back to the main road.

Liselotte gazed upon the ruins with an uncomfortable expression. “How… does it look?” she asked Rio. To her amateur eye, it looked damaged beyond repair.

“…I may be able to do something about this.” Rio replied as he looked around at the scattered parts of the carriage.

“Right… of course. Wait, what?!” Liselotte was already nodding reflexively when she processed Rio’s answer in complete shock.

Rio chuckled at Liselotte’s surprise. “While I can’t do anything about how terrible the carriage itself looks, fortunately the wheels and axles haven’t been damaged irreparably. If I make some temporary repairs, it should be able to hold on until you reach Amande.”

Aria was pleased to see the rare sight of her master’s surprise and was smiling along softly. Chloe was also

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

watching Liselotte's expression as though she was witnessing a rare sight.

Liselotte noticed their gazes and cleared her throat in embarrassment. "...That is... most fortunate indeed."

"Then I shall begin the repairs immediately. However, repairs of the metal roofing will be impossible to perform here, so may I ask for your permission to cut it off?"

"Cut it... off?" Rio's question made Liselotte tilt her head curiously.

"The dent is blocking entry into the carriage and the weight of the steel may cause burden for the carriage itself. I believe it'd be better to lighten the weight, but if it is an issue I can figure something else out..."

"No, no, that won't be a problem..." Liselotte said, confused. While she understood his intention, she couldn't figure out how he could perform such a task.

"Then, please stand back," Rio said, immediately beginning his work. Drawing the sword at his waist out of its sheath, he approached the overturned carriage.

"?!"

A flash. The steel roofing was cleanly sheared off from the body of the carriage, as though it had been sliced like paper. Liselotte and her attendants widened their eyes at the sight.

However, the steel plate was too large to cut down all at once, so Rio repeatedly changed locations and swung his sword with skill. Once the steel had been completely detached from the carriage, Liselotte somehow managed to voice her thoughts. "...Your skill is truly impressive."

"It's all thanks to this sword," Rio answered, holding the dwarf-made sword out to show them.

"You were controlling the wind with that sword in the battle earlier... That's an enchanted sword, right? And one of an ancient artifact class..." Liselotte asked hesitantly.

Enchanted swords were broadly defined as swords with sorcery embedded within them, but the precise definition

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

referred to it being ancient sorcery — sorcery that couldn't be reproduced using modern sorcery. Most people used the word in the narrower sense, but that didn't mean the broader sense of the word wasn't used.

The abilities of Rio's sword allowed him to cross swords with a minotaur head-on and fire a finishing blow in the form of a wind blast on par with higher class magic. It clearly deviated from what could be made with modern sorcery in the Strahl region. Thus, Liselotte suspected Rio's sword was an enchanted sword in the narrower meaning of the term.

However, enchanted swords of an ancient artifact class weren't exactly an item in common circulation, and even if one was on the market, it wouldn't be a price a commoner could afford. Even Liselotte only had a few to her name — one of which she had equipped on her confidant, Aria.

"A close friend bestowed it upon me. I have been using it carefully," Rio revealed partially, nodding without hesitation. He wanted Liselotte to misunderstand the strength he had shown in the earlier fight and attribute it all to the sword. While Rio's sword did have sorcery within it, its true effect was to take the user's spirit arts and wrap it around the sword. Incidentally, that effect also increased the power of the spirit arts.

Rio had no intention of spreading the knowledge of spirit arts throughout Strahl, so it was more convenient for him to let others believe that he had been fighting with the abilities of the enchanted sword instead.

"Oh my, is that so…" Liselotte's eyes widened.

At the very least, that means he's someone who can be entrusted with that sword. What a mysterious person. But he's personable, skilled, and he did save us. It would be rude to pry too deeply into him. I hope we can establish some kind of friendly relationship, though… she thought.

"All that's left is to reattach the wheels and turn the

carriage back up, then perform a final check for any other problems. It is not something you need trouble yourself with, Lady Liselotte, if you wish to return to directing others. They seem to be awaiting your orders over there." Rio looked at the road behind them as he spoke to Liselotte. At the end of his gaze were several curious attendants watching them.

When Liselotte noticed the attendants gazing at them from afar, she sighed quietly. "…Then I shall take my leave. I will leave my attendant Aria here, so please inform her if you need any assistance. Let's go, Chloe."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Chloe responded in a fluster, following after Liselotte. Just before they left, she shot an interested look at Rio.

"I'm leaving the rest to you, Aria. If you need any more hands, don't hesitate to ask." Liselotte winked a discreet wink at Aria with those words before she left. It was most likely an order to analyze Rio while the two of them were alone.

Aria understood her master's intent with just a look. She nodded respectfully. "…Leave it to me."

◇ ◇ ◇

"What are you girls loafing around for?" Once Liselotte and Chloe returned to the main road, Liselotte sighed tiredly as she addressed the attendants gathered there. Cosette took a step forward on behalf of the rest.

"We were waiting for your next orders, Lady Liselotte. The knights said they'll be watching our surroundings and gathering the enchanted gems, and we finished healing the wounded people and horses. We've also finished collecting the scattered belongings," she replied with a grin.

"I see," Liselotte replied, a sigh mixed into her voice. They had completed all the duties they were to do, she couldn't

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

really find fault with them. Then, a different attendant — Natalie — stepped forth.

“Also, regarding the disposal of the great sword stuck in the road, the knights said they would handle that after the collection of enchanted gems… As it seems we lack the hands to move it ourselves.” Natalie glanced at the corner of the road as she gave her additional report. There, the minotaur’s stone great sword was stabbed into the ground. It was roughly three meters in diameter.

“Right, we have to deal with that, too…” Liselotte recalled the earlier fight as she looked up the stone sword in a daze. In contrast, the attendant girls’ gazes were all drawn to the side forest where Rio was repairing the carriage.

“Umm, that really was an impressive fight earlier. Did you manage to find out anything about him?” Natalie asked hesitantly, looking at Rio. Even someone as serious as her couldn’t help but feel curious about him.

“That’s right! Who exactly is that ridiculously strong and handsome young man?” Cosette asked, brimming with curiosity. The other attendant girls also listened intently.

“…Apparently, Chloe’s acquaintance,” Liselotte said nonchalantly.

“Eh?!” Chloe hadn’t been expecting the sudden spotlight and flinched.

“Hey, that’s not fair, Chloe. Don’t hog him all to yourself. Introduce us later,” Cosette replied, immediately closing in on Chloe, who just shook her head in a fluster.

“N-No! By acquaintance, he just stayed at my family’s inn for a single night in the past, it’s not like we’re close enough for me to be introducing anyone!” Chloe shook her head in a fluster.

“Aww, really? I think that’s more than enough of an excuse to get close to him, though. Do you have any stories from back then? I want to hear more,” Cosette pressed, hounding Chloe for more details.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“That’s enough, Cosette. You’re bothering Chloe,” Natalie chided her with an exasperated look.

“Honestly, this is why you don’t have a single lover, you know?” Cosette sighed.

“Wha — I don’t want to hear that from you! It’s not a matter of the more the merrier, you know?!” Natalie complained with a red face.

“Okay, enough of that. No one wants to hear you two bicker all day again.” Liselotte put a stop to the two of them tiredly.

“Ahaha.” The other attendant girls laughed in amusement. Cosette and Natalie exchanged a look before pouting in slight embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Chloe’s attention was pulled toward Rio as he repaired the carriage in the woods. Her face seemed a little saddened, which made Liselotte notice her gloomy mood. “What’s wrong, Chloe?” she asked immediately.

“Ah, no, it’s nothing, my lady.” Chloe shook her head awkwardly.

“I know. You used to like him… am I right?” Cosette questioned with a teasing grin.

“Y-You’re wrong! That’s not what it is! And anyway, he doesn’t seem to remember me…” Chloe objected in a fluster, shoulders slumping dejectedly.

Her words seemed to trigger even greater curiosity within Cosette. “Hmm… It looks like you’ll have to tell us more about what happened.”

“Before that, you girls will distribute drinking water to the knights retrieving the enchanted gems. Then, do one more check for any more fragmented rubble scattered around the area,” Liselotte said, putting a stop to the chatter.

“Okay, Grace’s group will prepare the water for the knights! That means I’m free to assist Sir Haruto if needed!” Cosette replied energetically, looking in Rio’s direction as she offered her help.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Liselotte shook her head with a smile. “Absolutely not. You’ll only be in the way if you go. Now, get to work!”

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, Rio was repairing the carriage with very skilled hands. Since he didn’t need any help at the moment, Aria simply watched him work from the side.

“…You really are most proficient at this,” she said, the tone of her voice revealing her complete awe.

“I learned simple carpentry skills during my travels around various places,” Rio replied as he reattached a wheel to the body of the carriage.

“That’s wonderful. You also showed incredible sword skills in the fight earlier.”

“I’m just blessed with a brilliant weapon.”

“You jest. While it is true your enchanted sword is impressive in itself, what I witnessed of the sword user were skills above that. That amount of ability is not something that can be achieved so easily. You must have done some substantial training, no?” Aria asked.

“Thank you very much. I have made sure to keep up my training without fail ever since I was young. I saw that you have excellent skills yourself, Aria.”

“Thank you for the kind words. I was scouted by my lady for my sword skills. Oh, do excuse me… I must be distracting you from your work with this conversation,” Aria apologized with a strained smile.

Rio shook his head softly. “No, it makes for a nice change of pace. I do not mind continuing, if you are so inclined.” Just like how Aria and Liselotte were interested in Rio, Rio was also curious about Liselotte and Celia’s old friend, Aria. He wanted to talk to her while they were alone.

“Of course, it would be my pleasure,” Aria agreed readily.

“…Then, may I ask you something regarding what you

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

said before?”

Aria nodded. “Sure.”

“Have you been working for Lady Liselotte for a while?”

“You could say that. I believe it’s been about five years since I officially started working for her.” Aria replied as she reflected on the past.

“Five years ago… That was before Amande went through its huge growth advancement, right?”

“Yes. It was shortly before my master took on her position as Amande’s governor, right as the Ricca Guild was being established. Although we actually became acquainted before that.”

Rio paused in his work for a moment and smiled pleasantly at her. “Then it sounds like you really are Lady Liselotte’s most trusted confidant.”

“I would like to think that,” Aria said, a somewhat uneasy smile on her face. “Speaking of which, Sir Haruto, you mentioned that you visited Amande several years ago. Perhaps we have passed by each other before,” she said with a smile.

“That’s possible. I only stayed for a single night, but when I visited again recently I was shocked to see how much the city had developed in only a few years.” Rio replied, resuming his work.

“It’s an honor to hear that. Ever since being appointed as governor, my master has been putting her all into the development of the city.”

“I’ve traveled through many places, but I do believe Amande is amazing. It has been such a pleasant place to visit, that I find myself stopping by more frequently as of late.”

“Oh, is that so? If my lady were to hear that, she would be most pleased.” Aria bowed happily to Rio.

“Then please, do inform her. I have especially been in the care of the Ricca Guild for all my shopping,” Rio said with a

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

grin.

At that, Aria smiled. “I will make sure to let her know,” she replied in her melodic voice. “On that note, if I may ask purely out of my own curiosity… have you been traveling for a long time, Sir Haruto? From what I can see, you still seem to be in your mid to late teens.”

Rio thought for a brief moment before deciding to mix truth and falsehood in his answer. “…Yes, I’ve been traveling from the age of eleven. I am sixteen right now, so that would make my journey roughly five years long. I believe the first time I visited Amande was around four years ago.” Now that he had encountered Flora and the others unexpectedly, he added some fake points into his timeline, just in case.

“From such a young age… I also became an adventurer at a young age, but I was a few years older than that. Actually, at the age of eleven, you wouldn’t be able to register as an adventurer, would you?” Aria asked, eyes widening slightly. The Adventurer’s Guild had a general rule that one had to be at the age of twelve or above to register as an adventurer.

“Yes. Or rather, I still haven’t registered as an adventurer even now. It wasn’t something particularly necessary for me to travel around various kingdoms. That is why my main source of income was from liquidating the enchanted gems dropped by monsters I defeated along the way in the name of training,” Rio explained, revealing the fact he wasn’t an adventurer.

The adventurer guild was an international organization established by consignment of each kingdom. The original goal of the establishment was to force those unfit for working in regular society into the short-staffed national defense, putting them indirectly under the management of the kingdom and making them do labor effectively.

However, the international organization was in name only. While the organization headquarters formally did exist, its management was conducted by independent branches in

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

each kingdom. The reason for this was each kingdom needed to dispatch their own official to supervise the branch operations, which made it impossible to cross national barriers.

Furthermore, becoming an adventurer required registration at either the branch office or main headquarters, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. For example, joining a branch office meant restrictions against working under other branches (in this regard, joining the headquarters meant ability to move freely between branches).

"...True, while joining a guild as an adventurer does grant benefits from the organization, it also means that your actions may also become restricted. I've heard of people who dislike that and choose not to become adventurers, too," Aria said eloquently.

Who is he? What is he traveling for? The mysteries keep growing deeper with him, she thought at the same time.

"That should do it. I'm going to move the carriage back upright now, so please stand back a little." Rio said, having reattached the wheel successfully.

"That must be difficult to do alone. Allow me to help," Aria offered.

Rio shook his head. "No, the physical body enhancement of this sword is enough for me to manage alone."

"All the more for me to help. I have also been entrusted with an enchanted sword from my master, so please leave it to me," Aria said, refusing to back down. After being left here with the purpose of assisting, she didn't feel it was right to leave everything to Rio.

"I'll be fine, so please continue to be on guard of our surroundings," Rio said, holding his right hand out and placating Aria from taking action.

"However..." Aria paused on her feet. *The knights have already been doing that for a while now...* she thought

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

regretfully. She knew that Rio had to be more than aware that the knights were patrolling the area. That was why Aria thought he was probably offering her an excuse to take a break.

After that, Rio held his sword in his left hand and swung it in a show of drawing out the sword's power — when he was actually using his own spirit arts to strengthen his body.

"Up we go." Rio immediately dropped the sword and used both hands to grip the carriage firmly, lifting it easily.

Aria's eyes widened faintly. "...Splendid," she complimented. The attendants and knights nearby on the road were also taken aback, their gazes stolen by the sight of Rio lifting the carriage.

"All I did it was lift it up. It's the enchanted sword's doing." Rio said to Aria, implying their reactions were over the top.

"No, maintaining the enhancement after releasing the sword requires advanced control of your magic essence. And yet, you are doing that so easily."

When continuous sorcery like physical body enhancement was activated via magic artifact, it was generally quite difficult to maintain that sorcery after releasing the artifact. On top of that, the types of artifacts that required essence manipulation to activate the sorcery rather than a verbal spell chant tended to fluctuate erratically in performance. That characteristic was especially notable in ancient artifact class enchanted swords with high level sorcery embedded within. If the user's control of magic essence was lacking, they wouldn't be able to bring out the full potential of the artifact — in some cases failing to even activate the sorcery.

While Aria could perform the same stunt as Rio now, when she first received the enchanted sword from Liselotte, she had to go through rigorous training to be able to use it fully. At the very least, she couldn't do it at Rio's age. It was proof that Rio had that high of a control over his magic

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

essence, or so Aria had judged.

"...Well, it has been two years since I started using this sword." Rio said, gazing into the distant sky vacantly. While he had to adjust his story in order to hide the existence of spirit arts, in doing so he realized how much time had passed and felt nostalgic.

"..." The impression Aria received from peering at Rio's profile was both mature and childish at the same time, making her eyes widen with curiosity.

"I'm going to check for any abnormalities with the wheels on the other side. If there are no other issues, it can be carried to the road," Rio said, rounding to the other side of the carriage that had been facing the ground earlier. For a brief instant, he glanced at Aria's face.

Aria, huh. It's the same name that the Professor mumbled earlier, so she must be the same person. She doesn't seem like a bad person either. ...But for some reason, both her name and face feel familiar somehow, he thought, feeling rather peculiar.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the end, the carriage was deemed to have escaped from any irreparable damage. Upon returning to the main road, Aria immediately reported to Liselotte, who was cleaning the area with the other attendant girls.

"My lady, the emergency repairs on the horse carriage have been completed."

Liselotte's expression brightened. "Really?! Wait, and you even brought it all the way here!" When she spotted Rio clutching a rope and towing the carriage behind him, she was slightly astonished.

"Sorry for the wait," Rio said to Liselotte, pulling the carriage onto the road.

"...I do apologize, Sir Haruto, for making you transport

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

the carriage after repairing it.” Liselotte bowed her head at Rio apologetically.

“No — Aria also helped push from behind for most of the way. I borrowed the power of my enchanted sword, too, so it was much easier to handle than the attack from the minotaur,” Rio joked, shaking his head.

“Why, how reliable you are,” Liselotte giggled. Cosette suddenly approached, politely offering Rio a wooden mug to drink from.

“Sir Haruto, please accept something to drink.” It was brimming with a sweet fruit juice inside.

“Oh, thank you very much for the offer. Erm…” Rio bowed, thanking her pleasantly but finding himself lacking knowledge of her name.

“Do forgive me. My name is Cosette. I’m an attendant serving Lady Liselotte.” Cosette pinched the hem of her attendant uniform and curtseyed in an elegant manner.

“Pff…” Liselotte and Aria, who were familiar with Cosette’s true form, were just barely able to hold back their laughter at the sight of her enthusiasm.

“Thank you very much, Miss Cosette,” Rio said cheerfully, having not noticed the expressions of the other two twitching with laughter.

“I would also like to thank you for what you did for us earlier. It may be impudent of me to speak out like this, but I wanted to convey my gratitude. Please forgive my rudeness,” Cosette said, lowering her head deep in a show of respect.

Rio tilted his head with a troubled look. “It was nothing. And I am not a noble, so you do not need to act so formally with me.”

“I cannot accept that. My master owes Sir Haruto her life. Now, I shall take my leave from here… Thank you for your time.” Cosette shook her head gracefully and bowed her head before turning. With that clear message conveyed, she turned and left with the grace of a swan.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Seeing Cosette and Aria, it seems all your attendants are very well-trained, Lady Liselotte,” Rio said in awe.

“No, well… Thank you.” Liselotte nodded her head with a frown.

◇ ◇ ◇

Shortly after that, the knights that were on patrol for enchanted gems and possible threats started to return one by one. Once the knights were rehydrated, Duke Huguenot came over as well; they decided they would attempt to move the minotaur sword that was obstructing passage through the road.

“Now, let us move this to the side of the road.”

“I was the one who threw it at the ground. If you would like, I could be retrieve it myself…” Rio suggested.

“Hmm… Wouldn’t that be a little too difficult for you to do alone? I believe catching it in the air and swinging it is a much different burden to lifting it off the ground…” Duke Huguenot stated logically.

“Allow me to make an attempt first, then,” Rio said, squeezing the handle of his still sheathed sword and making a show of swinging it as though to draw out the enchanted power. He walked closer to the great sword, grabbing the stone sword that was several times taller than him.

“…Hah!” With a small breath, he exerted his strength. The great sword that was pierced into the ground creaked as it started to lift up. After a moment, it was pulled completely free.

“Oooh!” Cheers rose around Rio.

“It’s dangerous, so please stand back.” Unfortunately, the blade was rather long, so Rio warned the knights and attendant girls nearby to be careful.

Liselotte watched Rio with wide eyes. “…Could you do the same thing?” she asked Aria, who stood beside her.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“I won’t know until I try it for myself, but… I believe it should be possible,” Aria replied quietly.

“Oi oi, it sure is rowdy out here.” Hiroaki appeared from the carriage. Apparently all the noise had caught his attention.

Flora spotted Rio holding the stone great sword and widened her eyes as she mumbled in awe. “…It seems Sir Haruto is carrying that sword.”

Meanwhile, Hiroaki’s eyes landed on the same scene. He stared at Rio gathering the attention with a rather indifferent look in his eyes. “Hah, I see…”

Still carrying the great sword, Rio slowly walked over to the forest at the side of the road. The knights and attendants murmured to themselves as they watched him do so.

Oh, great… Now they’re all in an uproar. Sure must be nice, being attractive. It’s like living life in easy mode, having people fawn over you just for carrying something heavy… Hiroaki thought with an unamused face as he looked at the attendant girls fussing nearby. Even Liselotte was watching Rio with a look of awe on her face. Hiroaki found that fact the most unpleasant of all. In that time, Rio made it to the forest with the stone sword in hand and gently laid it down on its side in the forest.

Hiroaki sighed exasperatedly. *I guess it’s time to show them the power of a true hero.* He set off, walking towards Rio casually.

When Liselotte noticed that Hiroaki had alighted from the carriage, she called out to him. “…Hero?”

“Just watch this,” Hiroaki said with a smug look, heading towards the side of the road where Rio was. Rio had just stood up after his work was done and was turning on his heel to head back. He noticed Hiroaki approaching and tilted his head.

“Oh. Hello, hero. Is something the matter?”

“I was just wondering how heavy that stone sword was.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Just lend it to me for a sec.” Hiroaki smirked with a huff, grabbing the sword Rio had laid on the floor with both hands. With an audible grunt, he attempted to lift it up. Then, though he swayed uneasily for a moment, Hiroaki managed to hold the stone great sword up perfectly.

“Ooh!” The knights raised their voices in a cheer.

Roanna immediately got close, too. “Why, that’s splendid, Sir Hiroaki.”

“Ah, it’s a little hard to carry because of its size, but I guess this should do it. It’s no big deal.” Hiroaki smiled smugly, full of confidence in himself.

The way he holds his body is completely amateur, but his enhanced abilities show promise. If he has this much strength, then he’s probably stronger than the average knight, so it makes sense that he would be confident in his strength. But… is this spirit arts? Rio analyzed to himself, eyes widening.

“That is very impressive, hero,” he praised Hiroaki as he pondered.

“Hahaha. Well, you’re not so bad yourself. Let’s go back.” Hiroaki lowered the stone great sword back to where it was and patted Rio on the shoulder before heading back to the carriage at a brisk walk. Roanna accompanied him. Her chest was puffed up proudly at all the attention gathered on Hiroaki. Rio’s lips upturned in a smile as he followed the two of them from behind.

Hiroaki made a beeline for Liselotte and called out to her, obviously in a good mood. “C’mon Liselotte, let’s go. Get in the carriage. You too, Flora.” He included Flora as an immediate afterthought.

“Ah, yes.” Flora replied first. Liselotte nodded respectfully, glancing at Rio.

“Understood. Then, may Sir Haruto accompany us? We’ll be heading towards Amande next…”

“I also have business in Amande, so I have no reason to

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

object... But are you sure you want to let me in the carriage with you?" Rio asked, watching their party's expression observantly. His social standing wasn't appropriate to be riding with a hero, princess, duke, and two noble ladies. Normally, he wouldn't even be permitted to ride with regular nobles.

"There's no need to feel any kind of reservation. You did save all of our lives earlier, after all," Duke Huguenot said, smiling merrily.

"That's right, Sir Haruto. We also wanted to give our formal thanks, so please, you are more than welcome to join us," Liselotte said, bowing her head deeply.

Rio tried to stop Liselotte in a fluster. "No, no, please raise your head, Lady Liselotte."

"Yeah, he's right. Someone as great as you shouldn't be bowing your head so easily," Hiroaki agreed.

"...Do excuse me for my behavior, then." Liselotte said with a frown, looking at Rio.

"Now, let's get going already. Come on," Hiroaki said, heading towards the carriage first.

Thus, Rio followed Liselotte and the others to Amande.

◇ ◇ ◇

Liselotte led Rio to the carriage; he hesitantly stepped inside.

"...Excuse me." The interior of the carriage was spacious and could fit eight people when seated together. There, Hiroaki, Flora, Roanna and Duke Huguenot took their seats first.

Hiroaki looked at Rio entering late. "Well, have a seat," he said with a pompous air.

"Sir Haruto, please sit on this side," Liselotte motioned to the highest remaining seat.

"Thank you for the hospitality." Rio bowed politely before

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

sitting down. Liselotte chose one seat down from Rio's before sitting down too. It was the furthest from Hiroaki, who was seated in the highest position.

Hiroaki looked a little displeased at being further away from Liselotte, but he crossed his legs calmly. "So who are you, really? A noble from somewhere?" he asked Rio.

At that, Flora flinched. "Sir Hiroaki, asking such questions like that out of the blue... It's rude to Sir Haruto," she said to Hiroaki nervously, looking at Rio.

"Oi oi, are you telling me we didn't let him onto the carriage just to ask that? We should just cut to the chase for this kind of thing." Hiroaki gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

"H-However..." Flora watched Rio's expression worriedly as she stumbled over her words. There was a proper manner and procedure for which such things should be done, so when those of higher status ignored the rules, it made it harder for others to speak up. That was how a society built on status operated, after all.

With a faint smile, Rio shook his head to show he wasn't bothered. "Please, there is no need to concern yourselves over me. It is true my background hasn't been made clear to you."

"Well, from the looks of things, you're just a swordsman traveling around while training your sword skills. A typical cliche setting, but that's what makes it all the more suspicious. The guys outside were hasty to make a fuss about you, but I'd like to learn a bit more about your background before I trust you completely," Hiroaki stated bluntly, addressing Rio. Meanwhile, Liselotte found herself fighting the urge to ignore their status difference and interrupt several times.

...He's basically declaring his distrust towards him. Isn't that a bit too rude towards the one who saved you? Even if you want to ask more, there should be a way to go about

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

asking politely. His manners are all over the place.

But she had no choice but to stay silent; it would probably be best to thank him for the earlier fight at a later time without Hiroaki around, anyway. With that thought, Liselotte kept up the smile on her face.

"Naturally, I don't expect everyone to believe me so easily either… But unfortunately, I do not possess anything that can objectively prove my identity," Rio said with a frown.

"Well, the level of civilization in this world is what it is… If only you had something with a noble house crest on it, then you could prove yourself…" Hiroaki said, asking in a roundabout way whether he was a noble or not.

"As I said in the beginning, I am not a noble. If anything, I am a mere wanderer, a nomad that travels without a particular kingdom to call home," Rio said as truthfully as he could.

"Hmm… So that's why you're traveling everywhere?" Hiroaki asked, looking at Rio doubtfully.

"Yes." Rio nodded curtly.

"But doesn't your speech and behavior seems to be rather educated for a wanderer?" Hiroaki asked, looking at Roanna. He had heard from her earlier about how Rio's mannerisms didn't seem like that of a regular commoner.

"…I'm honored that you think so. But it is merely a life skill I picked up along the way. Because I am a wanderer, I have to endeavor to live peacefully with people no matter where I go," Rio said with a respectful bow.

"Hahaha. Well, you do seem to be able to speak well. I don't know how nomads and refugees are treated in this world, to be honest, but… Actually, how are they treated, really?" Hiroaki asked those around him with a cheerful grin.

"…It's not that they're a target of aggressive discrimination, it's just that they may be treated as inferior to locals that live in the area. That's why there are many

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

people who do not feel any attachment for the land and end up wandering from place to place," Duke Huguenot, the eldest present and most well-versed with the world, answered.

"Ah, I see. So that's how it is. Well, I get it... That's a problem that exists in my world too. Sure causes lots of headaches. There may be talented people among refugees, but they can't be treated with favoritism over the actual citizens of the nation. The more they stand out, the more the inferior locals will envy them, too," Hiroaki said in comprehension.

"You are most knowledgeable, Sir Hiroaki," Roanna said with a breath of awe.

"Eh, it's no big deal. But I guess that does give some credit to your story about traveling around the world, more or less." Hiroaki smirked smugly and looked at Rio.

"...I appreciate your kindness." Rio forced a smile on his face and bowed his head politely.

"Well, you don't seem like a bad guy. I suppose you can pass. At the very least, you now have a hero's stamp of approval of being trustworthy." Hiroaki laughed heartily as he spoke.

"That is an honor indeed." Once more, Rio bowed his head in a polite manner.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, outside the carriage where Rio was riding with the others...

"Say, Aria. You spoke with Sir Haruto a little, right? What was he like?" Cosette asked Aria enthusiastically. At that, Natalie and Chloe, who had been walking nearby, also closed in on Cosette and Aria to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Aria felt the curiosity of her subordinates as clear as day. "...It seems he is one year older than our lady, but he seems

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

very calm and mature for his age. He mentioned that he has been traveling for years now," she replied with a sigh.

Cosette and Natalie were both veteran attendants too. Aria was their leader as the head of the attendants, but their long years of working together made them more akin to equal colleagues.

"Anything else? Like his ideal woman or something," Cosette asked further, expression brimming with interest.

"There's no way I could ask something so intrusive in such a short conversation," Aria said with a tired look.

"But that's like, something you can observe when you're close up to him, no? Does he look like the type who likes quiet and graceful girls, or bright and talkative girls?" Cosette continued with a teasing wink.

"Unfortunately, I do not possess such observational skills." Aria shook her head curtly.

"Oh my, I'm not sure I believe that," Cosette objected. "For example, doesn't the hero seem like he would prefer girls that are meek and obedient? Of course, they have to be extremely attractive first, but still."

"H-Hey! That's disrespectful... What would you do if someone overheard that?!" Natalie interrupted in a panic.

"Oh, were you listening? Eavesdropping isn't very nice of you," Cosette responded bluntly.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Ugh. I was just walking nearby — of course I would overhear you,” Natalie winced as she argued back.

“Well, I knew you were listening anyway. It’s fine, I’m keeping my voice quiet enough that it won’t reach the knights’ ears. I’m barely changing my expression, too,” Cosette said with a shrug.

“True, that wasn’t a rather scathing criticism coming from you…”

“Right? In reality…” *…he’s an overconfident and intrusive man. Like the dimwitted son of a noble who mistook his family’s money and power for his own talent. That’s what I would have liked to have said instead,* Cosette thought, but didn’t actually voice out loud.

“Well, that aside, I’m sure you agree with my statement even a little in order to respond with what you did, no?” Cosette grinned at Natalie.

“T-That’s not true. He’s an amazing person. He picked up the minotaur’s sword earlier, after all.” Natalie answered with a squeak in her voice.

“That may be true, but… was there a need for him to pick it up at that point?” Cosette cocked her head doubtfully.

“…” The attendant girls had nothing to say in response.

◇ ◇ ◇

Back in the carriage with Rio and the others, nearly an hour had passed since their departure when someone knocked on the window of the carriage.

“Lady Liselotte, do you have a moment?” Aria’s voice could be heard calling for Liselotte from outside.

Liselotte opened the carriage window. “What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Amande has come into view. We will be arriving soon,” Aria reported, giving Liselotte only the necessary amount of information.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Huh? W-We're already here?! Liselotte's expression froze over.

"...Is something the matter, my lady?" Aria asked curiously.

"N-No, it's nothing. I was so immersed in conversation, I hadn't realized how much time had passed," Liselotte answered brightly, having regained her smile.

In the end, I wasn't able to speak to Sir Haruto at all because of the hero... she thought to herself. Hiroaki had dominated the entire conversation while they were moving. No matter what she spoke about, Hiroaki would immediately latch onto the topic and bring it in his own direction.

"Thanks for the report." Liselotte said to Aria, quietly closing the window.

"Are we at Amande already?" Hiroaki paused the conversation to ask Liselotte.

"Yes. It should be any moment now, so please get ready." Liselotte repeated what she was told with a smile.

"Hahaha. You say that, but we don't have any belongings." Hiroaki laughed cheerily.

Liselotte returned his laugh with a forced one of her own before she made her move in the lull of conversation. "Incidentally, Sir Haruto, do you have any plans after this? If it is to your convenience, I would love to invite you to my estate..." She turned to Rio and asked.

Rio frowned apologetically. "Please accept my apologies. I know it is rude to refuse the invitation of a noble, but unfortunately I have a rather urgent appointment to get to in Amande..." he said humbly.

Liselotte also frowned apologetically. "N-No, it's my fault for inviting you out of the blue... Then, would you be free to visit my estate on another day?" she offered instead.

"Yes. If you are so willing, then it would be my pleasure."

Liselotte sighed in relief. "Then, it is decided. Thank you

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

for going along with my whims," she said happily.

"No, I should be the one thanking you for the invitation," Rio returned with a well-mannered bow.

"Will you be staying in Amande for a while, Sir Haruto?"

"Yes, that is my intention."

"And have you decided on your lodgings?"

"No, the plan was to decide once I had met up with my company in Amande..."

"In that case, allow me to welcome you to one of the inns under the Ricca Guild's management," Liselotte said. While she was more than happy to have him and his company stay at her estate together, this was the more courteous offer to make after he had refused once already. Being too pushy would just make her seem more rude.

"I am grateful for your offer, but..." Rio hesitated in giving a clear answer. Considering it was an invitation, the accommodation was probably owned by Liselotte, and there was a high chance of it being a rather high class stay.

"It's the least I could do to show my gratitude. Won't you please consider accepting? It would also make it much easier for me to send a messenger too," Liselotte explained with a wry smile. Rio could have chosen to reject this proposal too, but after a moment of thought —

"...I understand. I shall take you up on your offer, then. There will be three people, including me — two of which are women who don't mind rooming together — if you could please take that into consideration," he said respectfully, bowing his head. Now that he had told her he was staying in Amande, he couldn't go and set up his stone house outside Amande anymore. Considering how this removed the hassle of searching for an inn, it seemed like a favorable trade off. Most importantly, having Liselotte aware of his location would also be beneficial.

"Understood. I will make preparations accordingly."

"Thank you very much. I should be free at any time from

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

tomorrow onward.”

“I look forward to it,” Liselotte said, lowering her head respectfully.

“I see you’ve been playing around, too, what with two ladies accompanying you. Nice.” Hiroaki grinned at Rio. After that, Hiroaki dominated the conversation once more, monopolizing the topics to his whim.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Interlude: Let's Make Uniforms!

Meanwhile, far, far away in the village of the spirit folk…

It was the middle of the day. Latifa and Sendo Aki were accompanied by their silver werewolf friend, Vera, as they returned to the house they were living together in. There, they found a group of four older girls gathered in the living room — Miharu, Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

"We're home!" Latifa and Aki called out enthusiastically as they returned.

"Welcome home," the older girls all replied to them warmly.

"Huh?! What are you wearing, Orphia?!" Latifa spotted Orphia's figure and beamed from ear to ear.

"Fufu, the clothes from where Miharu lived before she came here," Orphia replied, turning on the spot to show off her entire body. She had a beige blazer, a red ribbon at her chest, a knitted sweater, a plaid skirt, and black knee high stockings on. Orphia was wearing Miharu's high school uniform from Japan.

"Uwah…" Latifa's eyes were sparkling with awe.

Vera gazed at Orphia's outfit curiously for a moment, before brightening up with a friendly smile. "Wow, you wouldn't see those clothes anywhere in the village. But it's really cute!" Beside her, Aki was also enchanted by the sight of Orphia in a school uniform. After a pause, she offered her opinion with a beaming smile.

"Yeah, the uniform really suits you, Orphia!"

"Ehehe, thank you." Orphia thanked her with a smile.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“…Uni… form?” Vera tilted her head.

“The clothes that Orphia’s wearing. In the country we were from, older kids would go to school wearing the same clothes,” Aki immediately explained to Vera.

“That’s nice! Hey, I want to try it too. Can I please wear it, Miharu?” The fox tail Latifa was so proud of swayed from side to side as she pleaded at Miharu.

“Yes, of course.” Miharu giggled and agreed readily.

“Hmm… But I think that size may be a little too big for Latifa?” Sara stared at Latifa’s body and commented her doubts.

“Fufu. It was loose-fitting around Sara’s chest too, after all.” Alma said with a grin.

“It was perfect height-wise! Unlike you, Alma!” Sara objected in embarrassment, but Alma brushed it off nonchalantly.

“I am a dwarf, so I know I will be lacking in size in certain areas.”

“Geez!” Sara pouted cutely. Miharu giggled in amusement at the exchange between the two of them.

“Ah, then how about I lend you my uniform instead, Latifa?” Aki suggested.

“Huh? You have a uniform too, Aki?” Latifa’s expression brightened at once.

“Yup. I put it away in my room, so you can change there. Let’s go,” Aki said.

“I’ll wait here in anticipation!” Vera remained in the living room with the older girls. Not long after, Latifa and Aki returned, and Latifa was wearing Aki’s school uniform.

“…Ehehe, what do you think?” she asked with a smile, showing off her figure to the girls in the room. Aki’s uniform had a different design from Miharu’s, but it was also very cute.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Vera's eyes sparkled, and she was the first to speak up. "Wah! It suits you so well, Latifa!"

"Ehehe, thank you," Latifa said happily. She was still a primary school student when she lived in Japan as Endo Suzune, so she may have admired the school uniforms of middle school and high school students.

"Yes, you look great in it. Make sure you show Haruto too," Miharu said to Latifa with a smile.

Latifa nodded happily. "Yup! But I'd want Onii-chan to see all of us in uniforms together, if possible. We should make them, just like we did with the swimsuits!"

"Huh? These uniforms, for everyone? But unlike swimsuits, there isn't much use for them..." Sara's eyes widened in surprise.

Yes, this was a different case to the swimsuits. While the uniforms were cute, their appearance was rather different to the general clothes of the spirit folk village, so wearing them as everyday wear would make them stand out. However, Orphia was on board with Latifa's suggestion. "I think it's a good idea. I'm sure it'll be fun," she said.

"Yes, I agree. We'll only be showing Haruto, but I don't think it's a bad idea." Alma didn't seem to be against it, either.

"Don't you want to show Onii-chan what you look like in a uniform too, Sara? I'm sure he'll be surprised!" Latifa asked, her smile clearly seeing through Sara.

"Ugh..." When Sara imagined herself wearing a uniform in front of Rio, her cheeks reddened. For some reason, she felt unreasonably embarrassed about it, possibly because it wasn't her usual wear.

Orphia giggled teasingly. "Fufu, if Sara isn't into it, we could make it for ourselves and show Haruto without her."

"Wha — H-Hold it right there! I never said I wouldn't! I'll make it, I'll make it too!" Sara said in a fluster.

Latifa and Vera exchanged glances before giggling.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Fufufu…”

“W-What are you two laughing at?” Sara asked the two of them in a voice squeaking with embarrassment.

“Nothing!” they reacted innocently in sync.

Miharu and Aki smiled while watching their exchange. “Ahaha!”

“So that’s how it is, Miharu. Would you be willing to teach us how to sew once more?” Orphia asked.

“Of course. I’d be happy to,” Miharu agreed easily.

Latifa imagined all of them wearing uniforms and her face broke out into a happy smile. “Ehehe, I wonder if Onii-chan will be happy to see us.”

“Yes, I’m sure he will! Rio really loves you, after all!” Vera declared firmly.

“Yup, I know!” Latifa smiled with the most carefree smile. It was a face that knew fully that she was beloved by Rio.

Latifa sure loves Haruto… Aki thought as she looked at Latifa, feeling a little homesick. She was remembering her stepbrother, Sendo Takahisa. While she didn’t express her affection as directly as Latifa, Aki was aware she also had an unnatural attachment to her brother. That was why when she saw Latifa wholeheartedly adoring Rio, she often ended up thinking about Takahisa. Perhaps she felt empathy in the way she also adored her own stepbrother.

I wonder if Haruto’s noticed Latifa’s feelings?

No, it wasn’t only Latifa — Sara, Orphia, and Alma had the same feelings, too. They were strongly aware of Rio’s presence as a person of the opposite sex.

But Haruto’s surprisingly dull about these things. He seems like a very serious person, but does he have anyone he likes? Maybe someone from this group? Or perhaps Aishia?

Aki looked at the girls around her as she pondered.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 2: Arrival in Amande

Rio, Liselotte's party, and the others arrived in Amande. The carriage entered the city from the west gate and headed down the main street towards the city center, making its way to the northern district where Liselotte's estate was located.

"Thank you for accompanying me this far, Lady Liselotte." Rio was dropped off at the square in the center of the city to make his way to the accommodation that was prepared for him.

"It wasn't a problem at all. I'll send a messenger tomorrow morning, so please enjoy yourself for the rest of today. Aria, make sure you take care of Sir Haruto," Liselotte said from where she was seeing Rio off outside the carriage.

"Understood," Aria replied, nodding her head respectfully. Liselotte boarded the carriage once more and headed for her estate and Aria began her task of leading Rio.

"Allow me to show you the way, Sir Haruto. Please, follow me."

"Of course." Rio started walking after Aria. A moment later, they arrived at the inn.

"It's over here." The inn was located right in the square where the carriage had dropped them off. Being in the square at the center of the city, it was relatively close to Liselotte's estate and was a highly desirable location.

"Why, this is a most spectacular inn." Rio looked up at the inn he was led to with wide eyes. The three-storey building was made of elegant stone and seemed to be newly constructed, as it still appeared as such. There was no mistaking that it was of a higher class compared to the other luxury inns in the area.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Thank you for the compliment. Please, come inside.” Aria bowed her head respectfully and approached the entrance of the building. Several employees were waiting on standby before the inn — They seemed to recognize Aria’s face, as they welcomed the two of them in without interruption.

“Please have a seat over here and wait a moment, Sir Haruto.” Aria had Rio seat himself on a sofa in the lobby before heading to the front desk alone. Then, a female employee wearing a waitress outfit approached him.

“Here you are, Sir Haruto,” The female employee said, placing a cup of tea down before the sofa. She must have heard his name from Aria. Then, not even a minute later, Aria returned.

“Sir Haruto, preparations of your room have been completed. I shall lead you to it now, so please, follow me.”

“Lead the way.” Rio stood up and bowed briefly before beginning to move. He was led to a room on the top floor of the building.

“Would this room suit your liking? It has multiple bedrooms, so your company may stay in separate rooms from you if they so wish,” Aria explained once they arrived.

Rio looked around the spacious room in awe. “Naturally, I would never find a fault with a room as wonderful as this…”

The space allocated to the living room easily surpassed fifteen square meters, and there were multiple bedrooms on top of that. It was a pinch smaller than the stone house Rio owned, but it was undoubtedly the suite room.

“If you are satisfied with this space, then you are free to stay here as long as you wish. It has been reserved for your use without limit. And there will be no need to worry about fees.” Aria bowed and spoke reverently. It was all rather lavish.

“…I am much obliged.” Rio said apologetically, accepting Liselotte’s goodwill.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

◇ ◇ ◇

After Aria left the room, Rio sat down on the living room sofa and called out to Aishia through their telepathic connection. *Aishia, can you hear me?* For contract spirits like Aishia, it was possible to communicate with each other within a half kilometer radius.

Yup, I hear you, Aishia responded immediately, making Rio smile.

Thank goodness. Where are you right now? Since everything had happened so quickly, they had barely been able to communicate before parting, so Rio had feared he may have caused the two to worry.

Having tea with Celia at a nearby café.

Ahaha, I'm glad to hear that. They seemed to be having a more relaxing time than he expected, filling him with a sense of relief. However, that didn't seem to be the case.

Celia's worried, so come here quickly.

...Got it. There are things I want to tell you two, so I'll be right there. Rio quietly stood up from the sofa.

◇ ◇ ◇

Rio left the key to his room with the front desk and headed outside to meet up with Aishia and Celia.

Just keep going straight like that. We're in a cafe named Ciel — we're on the balcony on the second floor. Following Aishia's directions, Rio arrived at the aforementioned cafe.

"Welcome!" A pretty worker girl stood out front, welcoming Rio energetically.

"My companions have arrived already. May I head inside?"

"Of course. Go right ahead!" The girl agreed readily, leaving Rio to head up the staircase and towards the balcony. The balcony itself wasn't very wide, having only

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

enough room for one round table. Rio spotted Celia and Aishia sitting there right away.

"He's here," Aishia said, immediately noticing Rio's arrival.

"Haruto!" Celia jumped up, running towards Rio worriedly.

"Umm. Sorry for the wait, Cecilia." Rio smiled awkwardly, addressing Celia by her alias.

"Was everything okay? Are you hurt anywhere?" Celia asked worriedly, feeling all over Rio's body with searching hands. The two of them were standing at the entrance to the balcony, in plain view of the customers inside.

"What's this? The girl who was on the balcony is clinging to a man!"

"Isn't he handsome?"

"The two that were sitting on the balcony seats were really cute, too."

And so on. The female customers having tea at the cafe gossiped, their attention on the three.

"Ahaha, I'm not hurt at all, so please, don't worry. It feels like everyone's staring at us, so why don't we sit down first?" Rio felt the gazes stabbing into his back from inside the store and suggested they sit down with a grimace.

"Y-Yeah." Celia became aware of the fact that she was clinging to Rio and blushed furiously. She turned on her heel and timidly returned to her seat.

"Waitress, please bring me the cafe's recommended tea." Rio called out his order to the worker girl who had just come up the stairs to take his order, requesting an order of tea before going out on the balcony to sit next to Celia and Aishia.

"I apologize for making you worry, but the battle ended without incident. Cecilia's friend was also completely unharmed, so you need not worry about her either," he said to Celia. From this seat, the customers inside the cafe

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

shouldn't have been able to hear him. They would continue using aliases just in case, but their conversation should be fine to hold as long as they kept an eye out for the waitress. Incidentally, the table they were seated at already had several scones that they must have ordered earlier. Celia didn't seem to have much of an appetite, but Aishia was still chewing away eagerly, even now.

"Y-Yeah. We were watching from above up until just before the battle ended…" Celia nodded hesitantly.

"Then you should know that I am not injured, no?" Rio chuckled in amusement.

"W-Watching you was nerve-racking! You may have been overwhelmingly strong, but the monsters you were facing were huge too!" Celia said, pouting her lips. Rio may have been overwhelming, but the sight of him crossing swords from head-on with such gigantic monsters was heartstopping. It was enough to make her worry that Rio was being hurt somewhere she couldn't see with her naked eye.

"Ahaha. Maybe if I was still a kid, but I'm strong enough to go against those monsters head-to-head now." Rio laughed blankly, shaking his head as though it was nothing at all.

"Head-to-head… Those were minotaurs. The absolute strongest of the monsters that haven't been seen since the Divine War," Celia said in half exasperation, face twitching.

"But even you would have been able to defeat them, given the right conditions. No?" Rio asked, giving Celia a piercing look. She had to have acquired several magics that could take down a minotaur in a single blow herself. She wasn't called a genius sorceress for nothing.

"They move too fast, so I'd have to restrain them first, but… Wait, this isn't about that! Why does it feel like you're trying to divert the topic?!" Celia started seriously considering how she would have defeated them, but soon

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

snapped back to her senses, as she was busy worrying about Rio right now. She didn't want him in dangerous situations, after all.

"Ahaha, well, it looks like the tea is here, so let me explain what's going to happen from now on," Rio said with a faint smile, moving their talk forward.

"...Okay," Celia pouted, but nodded obediently.

"Excuse me. Here is the black tea you ordered." The worker girl stepped out onto the balcony and carefully set down a tea set before retreating immediately. Once Rio had confirmed she was gone, he began speaking.

"First, we'll be staying within the city of Amande for the next few days. Our accommodations have been prepared by Cecilia's friend, Aria, so we'll be staying there for the duration of the trip. I'm sorry to be springing this upon you without notice... I hope that's okay?"

Aishia paused mid-mouthful of a scone and gave an immediate response that showed she didn't particularly care. "It's fine."

Despite her agreement, Celia's face darkened with worry. "Of course, I don't mind either... but I'll have to be careful not to meet Aria. Well, I doubt she'd recognize me if we just passed by each other on the streets..."

"You give off quite a different impression to what you used to be like, so I think it'll be fine. But Aria won't be the only person you need to be aware of..." Rio said carefully, reluctant to speak up.

"...Is something wrong?" Celia tilted her head curiously.

Rio found his resolution and nervously revealed the truth. "Umm, there are actually visitors of Beltrum's royalty and nobility here at the moment."

"Eh?!" Celia's eyes widened in shock.

"Yeah, I was surprised too. I didn't notice until the battle was over." During the battle, Flora had been hiding out of sight, and Aria's fighting drew the majority of the attention.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

That's why Celia and even Rio hadn't noticed.

"W-Who was there?" Celia asked nervously.

"It turned out that other than Liselotte and her attendants, everyone else there was from the kingdom of Beltrum. The estranged faction of Duke Huguenot, to be precise. Second Princess Flora, Duke Huguenot, as well as Roanna from Duke Fontaine's faction, are also here," Rio said, listing off the most important figures.

"...They're all major figures." And they were all people that Celia knew of. "Wait, Roanna was your classmate and Princess Flora should have known you well too. Didn't they realize?" Celia noticed in a panic.

"Yes. Princess Flora has a good intuition and seemed to sense something was odd, but Roanna didn't seem to notice anything in particular," Rio replied readily.

"...Hey, wouldn't it be better if we left Amande immediately?" Celia suggested with a slightly panicked look. "No, we will stay in Amande." Rio shook his head in blunt refusal, his decision firm.

"Someone might find out, though."

"The greatest danger is Princess Flora, but we haven't seen each other in years. Not to mention the fact that my hair color is different now. I believe the risk is within a reasonable limit."

Outside of using dyes, there was no way of changing hair color in the Strahl region, but the concept of dyeing hair wasn't a common idea among the general public to begin with. Even if one did dye their hair, it would look far more unnatural compared to Rio's use of magic artifacts.

"...Is there a reason?"

"Yes. I wish to establish favorable relations with Liselotte. She is the daughter of the Galarc Kingdom's great lord, Duke Cretia, and the president of the Ricca Merchant Guild."

"With Liselotte?" Celia's eyes widened at the unexpected response.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Yes. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have a connection to someone powerful within this kingdom, in case the hero I am searching for is affiliated with the Galarc Kingdom and I needed a way to meet them formally. That’s why I want to earn her favor. Of course, saving your friend was also one of my goals, but the main reason why I intervened in the earlier battle was because of this,” Rio revealed honestly. On top of those reasons, forming a favorable relationship with Liselotte might also prove useful one day if they were ever to return Celia to the world of nobility, Rio thought.

“…Okay. Yeah, I understand.” Celia hesitated for a long minute, but seemed to reach an understanding as she nodded soon after.

“I’m glad to hear it. I was actually expecting more opposition than that,” Rio said a little unexpectedly.

“…It’s not like you’re trying to do something dangerous, right?” Celia asked, watching Rio’s face carefully.

“Of course not,” Rio affirmed immediately.

“Then I’ll believe in you. That’s been my decision from the get-go.” Celia smiled gently as she spoke.

“Cecilia…” Rio felt strangely embarrassed, but at the same time, happiness surged within him.

“But you mustn’t let your guard down, understood? She may seem like a girl close to your age, but Liselotte is well known for being a more than capable bigshot noble,” Celia warned. She was still Rio’s professor in areas like this.

“Yes.” Rio nodded his head happily.

“What are you so happy for? Well, whatever. I’m happy to answer any questions you might have, so feel free to ask me more, okay?” Celia offered shyly.

“Thank you very much. Actually, I had plans to meet Liselotte once again tomorrow. Could you teach me some of the etiquette involved in visiting the estate of a noble?” Rio smiled softly, immediately taking Celia up on her offer. She nodded happily.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Yup, leave it to me!” Celia nodded happily.

◇ ◇ ◇

After that, Rio, Celia, and Aishia chatted at the cafe for a while before heading to the inn. Aishia seemed to have acquired a taste for scones ever since the one she ate in Cleia and was more satisfied than usual.

“By the way, what kind of person is Liselotte?” Celia asked Rio on the way.

“She has a soft demeanor, but is a very intelligent woman. I suppose it makes sense that your friend would want to serve her.” Rio looked up at the skies as he thought back on his first impression of Liselotte.

“I see.” Celia smiled somewhat shyly. She must have been proud to hear her friend being praised.

“Speaking of which, is your friend — Aria — also from the kingdom of Beltrum?” Rio asked.

“Yup. She used to be my classmate at the Royal Academy of Beltrum, but, well… her house fell into ruin. She ended up dropping out of the academy. But she was an outstanding person, so she found employment at the castle easily. Though, the harassment got too much for her to bear, so she quit pretty shortly after that,” Celia explained.

Rio recalled the way Aria fought in the earlier battle and spoke in awe. “True, she did have a splendid sword arm from what I witnessed.”

“Yeah, back at the academy her marks in swordcraft could hold down the boys. She always came out on top.” Celia boasted proudly.

“I see. As a young and skilled female knight, it must have been hard for her to deal with the biased views of those around her.” Rio imagined the circumstances of Aria at the time with a bitter smile. The harassment was strong against Rio, who was an orphan on the streets, so it must have been

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

tough on a fallen noble.

“Eh?” Celia made a confused face.

“…Umm, did I say something strange? She was a knight, wasn’t she?” Rio also cocked his head curiously.

“Ohh, no no, that wasn’t it. Ah, I see… it would’ve been more natural for her to have been a knight, huh? Anyway, she was actually working as the head servant of the castle.” Celia giggled as she corrected Rio’s misunderstanding. The head servant was in charge of welcoming guests and ensuring they were comfortable; one had to be of the proper origins in order to do so.

“I see… I jumped to conclusions. Forgive me,” Rio apologized with a faint smile.

“Wait… hmm. Come to think of it, you should’ve met Aria once before too,” Celia suddenly said.

“R-Really?” Rio was taken aback, questions on his tongue.

“Yup. When you were seven years old and had been first summoned to the royal castle. Do you remember the girl who was in charge of looking after you, just before your audience with His Majesty?”

Rio finally remembered. “…Aah, the girl from back then. I had no idea at all.” His eyes widened to round circles as he recalled the fateful encounter.

“Fufu, I don’t blame you for forgetting. It’s been nine years, after all.” Celia smiled in amusement.

“Right,” Rio agreed with a huff.

“She actually quit her castle duties shortly after that. Then, she picked up the sword and became an adventurer, which is where Liselotte scouted her. I’ve met her several times since then, but it seems like she’s having the time of her life now.” Celia said, looking into the distance with a smile.

◇ ◇ ◇

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

At the Amande governor's estate, Liselotte was seeing to a one-on-one meeting with Duke Huguenot after allocating a guest room for Hiroaki, Flora, and Roanna.

"My goodness, have things taken a turn for the terrible ever since that dragon-like creature appeared." Duke Huguenot lowered himself onto the sofa and began to speak with tired finality.

"My apologies. I have caused you a fair amount of trouble… There were even people from your side who were injured." Liselotte frowned apologetically.

"No, we were the ones who insisted on accompanying you. Just because we were met with an unexpected enemy attack does not mean you bear the responsibility. There were serious injuries, but at least no one was killed. As long as we fulfilled our role as guards, then all is well." Duke Huguenot shook his head warmly.

"…I am most grateful for that. It was most fortunate that the knights had a very sturdy defense. If I were traveling alone with only my followers, I do not believe we would have made it out without any deaths," Liselotte replied respectfully.

"No no, I heard your attendant ladies played quite an impressive part of the battle, too. Especially Aria. Raymond, the leader of the elite guards, was insisting that her strength could even reach that of the King's Sword."

"Why, did he really? I'll be sure to pass that on to her later, then." Liselotte smiled happily.

"…It appears our kingdom really did release a wonderful talent, regretful as it may be. But I am in awe of your abilities in having selected someone of her worth." Duke Huguenot chuckled, shrugging his shoulders with exasperation.

"But Aria alone would not have been able to overcome that crisis. Minotaurs and unknown humanoid monsters… The battlefield immediately took a turn for the worse when

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

they appeared.” Liselotte recalled the events with a dark grimace.

“Hmm. Of the four minotaurs that appeared, your Aria defeated one, right? I heard the humanoid monsters that spawned at the same time were fairly powerful opponents too. It was most commendable how she was able to escape unaided after being surrounded. But the boy who appeared after that left an extreme impression too. His power was truly overwhelming. If he hadn’t appeared, we may have been wiped out.” Duke Huguenot analyzed the events of the attack calmly.

“...However, wouldn’t the hero have the power to overturn that situation, if it came down to it?”

“Hahaha, perhaps. But the hero lacks real experience in battles — even you should be aware of that, I am sure.” Duke Huguenot laughed inappropriately, questioning her in return.

“...I suspected as much, but to be honest, I still have not been able to adequately measure how much power the hero has within him. He does not appear to have any substantial practical training, but he was able to pick up the minotaur’s sword. Was he only able to accomplish that because he brought out the power of the Divine Arms?” Liselotte asked, speaking honestly of her impressions of Hiroaki.

“Yes, you can consider Divine Arms to be in the same category as enchanted swords. It’s similar to how compatibility with the weapon brings out more power, but in the case of Divine Arms that compatibility is limited to the hero alone. Although there are irregular cases where the power of a Divine Arms can be drawn freely or without any training. There are many mysteries surrounding the topic, but heroes and Divine Arms are certainly special,” Duke Huguenot said, nodding his head deeply.

“Which means what your hero is lacking is real battle experience after all?” Liselotte asked with a serious

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

expression.

“Indeed, he does. Well, it appears he never had any combat training to begin with, and we do not wish for our precious hero to be placed in danger either. Thinking it premature for him to experience real battle, we had limited his training to casual mock battles with the knights. Recently, he’s building his confidence through consecutive wins, so we were considering moving him onto low level monsters and experience the air of a real battle, but…”

It appeared as though the air of a real battle was different. Regardless of the fact Hiroaki held such a mighty power as a hero, when he felt his life was in danger, he became nervous — and useless.

“His first battle turned out to be a rather heavy experience.” Liselotte let a bitter smile show.

“That it did, that it did. But real battles never go according to plan anyway. At least it became a valuable experience, if we were to think of it optimistically,” Duke Huguenot said with a hint of a bitter smile.

Based on their conversation until now, Liselotte formed her guess of Duke Huguenot’s thoughts. *So it seems that Duke Huguenot really isn’t using him for anything other than a symbol of divine will, for now. His use in battle comes secondary, which is exactly what I expected.*

Similarly, Liselotte agreed with Duke Huguenot’s perception of political balance. It would be a different case if a large scale war was on the horizon, but at present there was no need for the hero to flaunt his power and leave a legend. At worst, it could be perceived as a threat to the neighboring kingdoms, after all.

And, unlikely as it may be, if the hero became so absorbed with his own power he separated from the kingdom, that power would be pointed towards them instead. Because of that, this was the time to be ascertaining the hero’s personality and building trust in their relationship.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“By the way, on a slightly different note, could we discuss the boy a little?” Duke Huguenot’s tone changed as he spoke solemnly.

“…You mean Sir Haruto, yes?”

“He defeated three of the four minotaurs that appeared. He also eliminated several of the mysterious but powerful humanoid monsters… An impossible feat had he not had full control over his enchanted sword. Honestly speaking, what do you think of that extremely powerful enchanted swordsman, Liselotte?”

“…Based on his speech and conduct — and of course, his sword mastery — I felt a sense of elegance and refinement. While I can understand why someone of nomad origins would need such behavior…”

“There are still many unexplained points there. Although, the possibility of him being a secret agent shouldn’t be dismissed either, I find it more likely that he is a noble in hiding due to some circumstance or another, or perhaps someone from a fallen noble family?”

“…Yes, there are cases like Aria’s, too. If he was from a fallen noble family, I can understand why he wouldn’t want to speak of his own background. As for the other possibility, I have nothing to offer there,” Liselotte agreed, speaking eloquently.

“I figured. As we continue building our relationship with him, I would like to learn more about his background…”

“However, it would be a bad move to show any signs of our suspicions. It would be most improper to be discourteous to the one who saved us, and for someone of his skill, I wish to treat him carefully and build a relationship of trust.”

If they interacted while using a heavy-handed approach, it could result in antagonizing themselves foolishly.

“I feel the same. It seems we really are on the same page,” Duke Huguenot said with a chuckle.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“What do you mean?” The normally sharp Liselotte seemed to feign ignorance.

“Hahaha, how harsh of you. I mean in our desire to build trust with him. With our eyes set on the same person, it would be best to have our first step planned in advance. Wouldn’t you agree?” Duke Huguenot laughed heartily, coaxing Liselotte to respond.

“Do you wish to sit in on our meeting tomorrow?” Liselotte asked with a small sigh.

“I’m glad you’re quick on the uptake. I wish to meet him more for the sake of the future, too.” Duke Huguenot nodded firmly.

“I understand. Then I shall set up such a meeting for you,” Liselotte agreed easily.

At any rate, the hero will probably demand to sit in as well. If I have to do this either way, at least giving permission beforehand counts as doing a small favor, she thought.

“As a token of my gratitude, feel free to use my knights as you wish. Naturally, you will be conducting investigations into the mass spawning of monsters, no? If you are to search the forests, the more hands on deck, the better,” Duke Huguenot suggested as compensation.

Liselotte gave a radiant smile. “Why, that would be a great help. I was thinking of sending only the best people.”

“Abnormal situations have been occurring continuously, including the appearance of that dragon-like creature. I’m sure it has been a source of many headaches, what with all the incidents being caused by matters not of mankind.”

“...Yes. Actually, there were reports of adventurers going missing some time ago, which could possibly be related to the mass spawns of monsters.” Liselotte frowned bitterly.

“I understand how you must feel,” Duke Huguenot murmured, sighing quietly.

“I have no words for all the trouble we must have caused

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

you, having you come here at such troubling times."

"Hahaha. No no, we were the ones who chose to visit you unannounced. I should be the one apologizing for visiting uninvited at such a busy time."

"That is no trouble at all, but... Did you come here with some business in mind, Duke Huguenot?"

"Oh yes, now that you mention it... all the events up until now have completely distracted me from our original goal." Duke Huguenot shrugged with a faint smile.

"Which is...?" Liselotte cocked her head, inquiring after his intentions.

"It's about Charles Arbor's wedding ceremony. We received information that due to certain circumstances, the bride Celia was abducted. I wanted to hear your story, as someone who was present."

"...Is that so? Information travels fast." Liselotte said, impressed. *I had assumed the mastermind behind the incident was Duke Huguenot, but could I be wrong?* Contrary to her outward attitude, she analyzed his words calmly.

"I would like you to tell me more about it. To be honest, I am not sure which force would be behind it."

"I'd be happy to."

Thus, the two began their discussion about Celia's abduction.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Interlude: Meanwhile, in the Proxia Empire

The Proxia Empire was a military superpower located north of the Strahl region. It boasted a large land size and bordered the Beltrum Kingdom to the south, which was shaped longer horizontally, whereas the Galarc Kingdom to the southeast was shaped longer vertically.

However, while its landsize was comparable to its vast military prowess, the Proxia Empire was, in actuality, an extremely young country established merely 40 years ago.

The founding emperor, Nidoll, was a former orphan born to a small and impoverished kingdom. Once he grew up and started working as a mercenary, he made a name for himself with his unparalleled fighting ability. After seizing sovereignty of the small kingdom he belonged to, he formed the Proxia Empire.

The lands to the north of the Strahl region had once been known as warring countries, high in number and small in size. Led by Nidoll, the Proxia Empire army stormed them one after another and expanded its land size in the blink of an eye. At the center of their military force were the elite demi-dragon knights, a squad formed of low ranked demi-dragons including winged lizards and lizard runners. They made use of the demi-dragons' mobility to specialize in blitzkrieg-like attacks and capture over twenty small countries to date.

However, the strongest warrior that supported the Proxia Empire was not in the demi-dragon knights. The strongest person in the empire, both past and present, was the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

founding emperor — Nidoll Proxia.

Even in his sixties, Nidoll's physical body showed no sign of old age; his enormous frame was still as hard as a boulder and fighting prowess as tremendous as ever, leaving both his own country and other countries in fear. Word of Nidoll's military exploits had traveled wide and far throughout Strahl, making him undoubtedly the strongest in the entire region.

At present, somewhere in the imperial capital of the Proxia Empire, Nidgard, Nidoll stood on the wide balcony of the towering imperial castle, idly looking down at the cityscape of the capital below. While the area would normally be forbidden to even the nobles of the imperial court, from behind Nidoll spoke a friendly male voice.

"Yo, Nidoll. How's it going?"

"Bored," Nidoll replied listlessly. He didn't bother to turn around, showing no interest in the man talking to him.

The young man was wearing the outfit of a soldier. His body was clad in high-quality combat clothes, and there was a sword hanging from his waist, but he showed none of the proper mannerisms of a knight.

"Ha. You're always looking so damn depressed. Are you that restless for war? Actually, I've just been preparing an interesting stage for you to take part in," the man said with a sneer.

"Hmph. My tastes don't match yours. I'm not interested," Nidoll answered with a huff.

The man shrugged his shoulders with a sigh. "Yeah, yeah. Stubborn as usual, I see. That aside, what are you gonna do? What about Beltrum? Though I'm not involved over there."

"I couldn't care less about that kingdom," Nidoll stated bluntly.

"Now now, you shouldn't be like that. It wouldn't be fun if the Arbor faction fell now."

"Don't worry about that. As a sign of friendship and

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

reassurance, I've sent an official goodwill ambassador. Nothing will come of their internal conflicts."

"Hah. You sure went out of your way for a kingdom that'll fall sooner or later." Contrary to his words, the man gave a pleasant smile.

"I suppose we do agree there," Nidoll said, huffing with a grin.

"Right. I guess I'll be making my way back to the kingdom of Paladia now." With nothing more to say, the man made to turn on his heel and leave, when another man's voice rang through the terrace.

"Please wait a moment."

"Ah? Well, if it ain't Reiss," the man turned back and said. There, standing before him, was the man in question.

"I've been searching for you, Mr. Lucius," Reiss said, grinning with an emotionless smile.

"Hah, and you always seem to show up at the most convenient time for yourself," Lucius said with a sneer.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Now, don’t say that. You and I know each other quite well, do we not?” Reiss retorted with a hollow smile.

“Stop that — it’s disgusting. If you have business, say it already,” Lucius said in clear irritation. Nidoll didn’t seem to be particularly interested in their exchange, as he observed with a blank face.

“I actually wanted to ask you for assistance,” Reiss said.

“Let’s hear the deets,” Lucius said with a grin.

“As you may have heard already, the Kingdom of Beltrum has been shaken by the incident involving Charles Arbor’s wedding ceremony. I am thinking of attacking the Ricca Guild in order to correct that balance, but I lack the military strength to do so,” Reiss said regrettably.

“You’re saying your collection isn’t enough?”

“Yes, the Ricca Guild’s closest confidant was stronger than expected, along with — no, on top of another rather irregular case. In terms of combat ability, even a significant number of minotaurs and revenants weren’t enough to put up a fight.”

“Oh?” Lucius’ eyes widened in interest.

“This irregular case has been quite the thorn in my side, which is why I wanted to ask for your cooperation. Oh, and your help won’t be needed, Nidoll. You stand out too much.” Reiss said, turning to Nidoll to state the last few sentences with emphasis.

“Hmph. I am aware.” Nidoll snorted disinterestedly.

“So you want me to take care of that irregular case, is that it?” Lucius asked jokingly, but Reiss bluntly shook his head.

“No, I’ll have my monsters create a distraction while you’ll be in charge of conducting a kidnapping.”

“Tch. What a boring role.” Lucius was clearly disappointed.

“As it should be. If the kidnapping is successful, the goal of the attack will be achieved. Purposefully putting our best against a formidable opponent would be the most foolish of

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

moves to make.” Reiss sighed in exasperation. He knew that Lucius must be aware of this himself, but he also knew that Lucius liked to prioritize his own pleasure over logic at times.

“I know, I know. Well, I’ll still make sure to have fun in my own way. So who do you want me to abduct? If you’re in Amande, then it’d be that Lisse-something brat who’s been making a name for herself everywhere recently, no?” Lucius asked casually.

Reiss shook his head faintly. “No. While it would be favorable to take her if the chance arises, she is only my second priority. The target is someone else.”

“Oh? Weren’t you aiming for the Ricca Guild?” Lucius furrowed his brow dubiously.

“Yes, attacking Amande and destroying the city would create quite the issue for the Ricca Guild, or rather the Galarc Kingdom in general,” Reiss replied in a roundabout way.

“Hah. Cut the crap tell me who the target is already,” Lucius urged Reiss with annoyance.

“The Second Princess of Beltrum — Princess Flora.”

Reiss revealed the name of their attack target, and the plan to raid Amande quietly progressed.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 3: Intruders

Back in the Kingdom of Galarc, in the city of Amande, the night after Rio had defeated the minotaurs and saved the day…

The cafeteria on the first floor of the Ricca Guild inn that Rio was staying at was also open to the general public as a luxury high end restaurant. Rio was enjoying dinner with Celia and Aishia in a private room; directly opposite to the door of the private room they were using was an open window. It allowed them to look over the spacious back courtyard as they enjoyed the finest food and liquor, and on days with good weather, the terrace was open for seating, too.

“Having such a wide garden at the back of an inn is wonderful. It’s been well maintained.” Celia gazed at the garden in an uplifted mood as she waited for the next dish to be carried out.

“It’s an inn. Would be perfect if it had a bathtub deep enough to submerge in,” Aishia uttered simply.

“That’s dreaming a little too high, there. Baths like the one in the stone house aren’t common in the Strahl region. Isn’t it enough that there’s a bathroom in each room?” Celia asked with a wry smile.

There were bathrooms in the rooms allocated to Rio’s party, too, with a shallow bathtub that allowed for washing up, but they didn’t compare to the bath installed in the stone house. However, bathrooms were already more than enough by Strahl region standards.

“The two of you are completely accustomed to deeper bathtubs, I see,” Rio said with a smile.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Yup, I like taking baths. Makes me sleepy.” Aishia nodded, speaking softly.

“This girl really falls asleep, you know? I was so surprised when I got in after her,” Celia said tiredly.

“The warmth is comfortable.”

“Geez…” Aishia’s blunt remark made Celia puff up her cheeks slightly.

“Ahaha,” Rio laughed with amusement. From appearances alone, Aishia looked more mature than Celia did, but at times like this it was hard to tell who was older.

Thus, their conversation continued until a waiter knocked on the door to the room and carried in the newest dishes.

“Thank you for waiting. Would you like to select your next drink too?” the employee asked, noticing that there was little alcohol remaining in the decanter.

“Let’s see. Cecilia, would you like to choose the next one? I’m not too familiar with the different makers,” Rio said. Having been raised as a noble, Celia should’ve been more familiar with brands and makers than Rio.

“I’m not very knowledgeable myself…” Celia said as she looked at the menu. “Then how about this house wine, in the same decanter as this, please.” The wine on the front sign of the store seemed to have attracted her attention, as she pointed it out for their order.

“Understood.” The store attendant responded respectfully, leaving without a sound.

“Where was the wine made?” Rio asked.

“Here in Duke Cretia’s territory. It’s a product made in the vineyards of the Ricca Guild. Since it’s a locally made item and all, how about we just sit back and enjoy ourselves?” Celia said, giggling happily.

“Yes, I think that’s a good choice.” Rio nodded with a faint smile. He normally couldn’t help himself from drinking the alcohol made by the spirit folk, but having a Strahl-made drink for once sounded good. All the more so during a time

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

like this when they were living an irregular, luxurious lifestyle.

“The new dishes are also delicious.” Aishia maneuvered her knife and fork elegantly to pick at the newly served dishes while smacking her lips. A gentle mood had settled in the peaceful and refined private room.

“...It sounds kind of noisy out there,” Rio said with a glance at the door. Shouting could be heard down the corridor; it seemed as though someone was arguing. Since the restaurant was so quiet, the slightly raised voices could be heard quite well.

“...Is it a fight?” Celia murmured worriedly. As more time passed, the arguing party seemed to be drawing closer to their room. Then, right on the other side of the door, the aggravated voice of a young man could be heard.

“I’m telling you, I insist on using the private room I had last time. If it’s money, I can pay three times the usual rate.”

“This isn’t a matter of money. The room is currently in use by other customers. We will not ask them to leave,” a man who was most likely an employee of the inn objected firmly.

Judging by the situation, Rio took a guess at what was happening and spoke rather tiredly. “...It sounds like this room may be in demand.”

“What... should we do?” Celia asked, looking at Rio.

“Let’s wait a little longer and see what happens. They could be trying to use a different room, so it would be a little silly to purposely step outside if we were wrong.” Rio’s words were simple as he gave a gentle smile.

“We’re visiting as very important guests. The upper class of this city will hear of this,” A different male voice to the aggravated man said, speaking carefully. His voice also sounded rather young, his tone overbearing. In reality, by dangling their influence, it was clear they were making a threat. Perhaps they were used to things like this.

“...If you’re referring to Lady Liselotte, then please, feel

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

free to appeal to her directly. We are simply following our instructions." The inn's employee did not back down.

"...What a stubborn fool. Enough — it's no use speaking with you. You'd better watch your back later," the second male said as a final warning.

"As you wish," the employee replied bluntly.

The aggravated man must have run out of patience, as he spoke up in irritation. "That's enough, Stewart. We'll settle this with the other customers ourselves."

"You may not," the employee protested, but the angry man's voice rose loudly.

"Move it. You're in the way."

"S-Sir! You cannot do this!" The employee yelled; perhaps he had been pushed out of the way. The quarrel was occurring right outside the room Rio and the others were in. It was almost certain that their room was the one in question.

"...I'll deal with this. The two of you should ignore them." Rio sighed with annoyance from the bottom of his heart as he addressed Celia and Aishia. Immediately after that, the door to their room flew open without even a knock.

◇ ◇ ◇

Stewart Huguenot was Duke Huguenot's eldest son. With his father the most prominent great lord in the kingdom, he was the prodigal son that had been raised with everything he could ever want.

While he was satisfied with the minimum amount of time his busy father spent with him during his childhood, those around him would praise him endlessly. Even if he caused a little trouble here and there, no one would scold him. But even for someone like Stewart, there were two turning points of his life.

The first was when he was eleven and participated in the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

outdoor drill at the Royal Academy, during which the incident where Flora nearly fell off the cliff occurred. The blame had been falsely shifted to the orphan, Rio, but it was the first time Stewart had provoked the fierce rage of Duke Huguenot since he was born.

However, contrary to the intense emotions of rage, Duke Huguenot was exceedingly cold. Instead of verbally abusing his son for the failure, he listened to Stewart directly explain the events that happened.

“There will be no next time.”

He’d concluded with those menacing words, his cold gaze mixed with disappointment and contempt.

“Y-Yes, sir!”

It was the first time Stewart felt fear toward his father. At the same time, he realized that he would never be a subject of his father’s familial love. Because Duke Huguenot had not felt anger towards his son, but anger at prioritizing himself over his family. When he had said “There will be no next time,” the duke was declaring that the next time Stewart made a fatal mistake, he would be mercilessly discarded as nothing more than a defective item. To Duke Huguenot, he was no more than a political tool. Stewart finally realized that harsh truth.

Perhaps it was from then onwards that Stewart became more aware of his status in society. While his outward attitude did not change, he was constantly aware of whether he was dealing with people higher or lower than him, constantly checking and clarifying his own status. As a result, Stewart discriminated more against those he believed were below him, while interacting carefully with those he was unsure of or above him.

The second turning point of Stewart’s life was when his father, Duke Huguenot, lost his position. He learned that even his terrifying father could fall… Perhaps he had misjudged their status, or maybe there were other

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

complicated factors that had contributed. Still, when he considered that, Stewart suddenly felt fed up with the life of a noble. There was no way he could change his lifestyle at the age of fifteen, and he had already been raised as a noble accustomed to a certain standard of living.

However, Stewart had no confidence in his ability to behave as Duke Huguenot's successor well in the future. If there was a successor, it would be his little brother. Some people even believed Duke Huguenot had raised his brother as the main succession candidate.

What a pain in the ass.

When Stewart firmly started to believe that, he appealed to Duke Huguenot to become a knight instead. As a result, his request was accepted readily and he was placed in the elite guard tasked with protecting Flora. It was awkward being with Flora due to their history at the Royal Academy's outdoor drill, but he wasn't about to object to any orders from his father.

Thus began Stewart's life as a knight, but there were rarely any dangerous missions to go around when following royalty like Flora. At most, he would go and exterminate monsters in the name of practical training, and complete escort mission trainings.

However, even then, Stewart's life was fulfilling. He didn't need to think about anything when he was swinging his sword at monsters, and it was a good form of stress relief. On top of that, he had a partner in crime in the form of his upperclassman from their academy days, his now-colleague Alphonse Rodan.

Alphonse was the second son of Marquess Rodan, and another stereotypical example of a prodigal son. He was similar to Stewart in the way that he liked to use his status to the maximum degree, doing as he liked. Ever since being appointed into the same elite guard for Flora, Stewart and Alphonse hung out more than ever before. They would

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

eliminate monsters together, eat meals from the same pot, and drink together while grumbling. Recently, they even started polishing their skills in womanizing together, as noble prodigal sons would.

As time progressed, Sakata Hiroaki had become their charge after he'd been summoned, but that had made no significant impacts on Stewart's life. If he had to pick a bone with something, then it was probably the fact he secretly considered Hiroaki to be intolerable — and detested him, thanks to Hiroaki's clearly condescending attitude.

Today's events changed nothing.

The boy named Haruto had suddenly appeared at the scene, slaughtering the powerful minotaurs in front of Liselotte's attendants, who lavished him with attention, which was understandable. While they weren't happy having the best part taken away from them, most of the knights present — including Stewart — had shuddered in awe at the sight of how he'd fought. It was the reason why Stewart and Alphonse decided to use that as a topic to approach the beautiful ladies that served Liselotte. And so, after arriving at Amande, the two knights started chatting up the attendant girls in the garden of Liselotte's estate good-naturedly. Hiroaki must have been listening, as he suddenly interrupted.

"Ah, well. Intruding on another party's battle and stealing all the limelight isn't really something to praise."

Right beside him were Flora and Roanna. The friendly air that Stewart and Alphonse had built up dispersed in an instant.

"Forgive me for asking, great hero, but what do you mean by that?" Despite his irritation, Stewart questioned Hiroaki courteously.

"We were finally fighting with coordination. If a third party slips into the fight without permission, what do you think would happen? Of course the fight wouldn't go as

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

planned, ruining everything. Well, the one stealing the kills probably thought he was being helpful. If you ask me, it's bad manners." Hiroaki sighed in exasperation.

"Hah..." Stewart let out a dumbfounded reply. The first half of that speech aside, he had completely lost track of what Hiroaki was saying partway. There were no manners in a life or death battle with monsters.

"Well, I can understand his feelings of irritation, watching the small fry desperately struggle to fight. Guys who steal kills like that tend to crave attention like, 'oh my god, look at me, I'm strong right? I'll lend you a hand!' It's an act that steals the opportunity for those already fighting to learn and develop. It spoils the mood, since lots of people hate having their prey snatched from under their nose." It was a statement that completely insulted the knights that had been on the battlefield. However, Hiroaki didn't seem to realize that, as he continued to blabber away without pause.

In the end, Roanna had to prompt Hiroaki to move on before he wandered away, ruining the mood for any further discussion as the attendant girls soon took their leave to return to work.

Stewart, in the meantime, headed to the guest facilities allocated to them for the day in displeasure. It was a splendid building directly beside Liselotte's estate. However, even though there was good food and drink, there were no women. Liselotte's servants were present, but they weren't about to make the servants pour their drinks for them.

And so, on this visit to Amande too, Stewart headed out to the city with Alphonse to clear their gloomy moods. While part of the reason was due to his irritation at Hiroaki's earlier ignorant remark, he had also just gone through a battle of life and death with more monsters than he had ever faced before, leaving his mind and body helplessly worked up.

They headed to a bar targeted towards the wealthy and

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

had a drink and snacks before happily moving on to another bar that specialized in entertainment from women. Having previously visited this store and paid good money, they were remembered as important customers and welcomed warmly, and chose two of the prettier girls among the staff to serve them.

"Well, he's all talk and attitude. There's nothing much else to him, really." They spoke their complaints about someone in particular whilst drinking heartily. Eventually, the name of a famous restaurant in Amande was brought up.

"Yeah, we've been to that store before. I can take you there now, if you'd like," Stewart said, showing off. The girls were completely on board with it, so Stewart and Alphonse left the bar with the girls in high spirits.

However, the situation took a turn once they arrived at the aforementioned restaurant. They'd decided on using the best private room for the occasion, but when he requested the room...

"Our deepest apologies. That room is already in use by another customer. I can prepare another private room for you right away..."

The room Stewart was after was already in use. It was like someone had dumped cold water on him after he'd finally recovered his mood.

"Well, why don't you show us the other options first?" Alphonse said high-handedly. With that, the male employee lead Stewart's party inside the shop.

"...I think I want the room I requested after all. Can't you prepare that instead?" Alphonse insisted unreasonably.

"I'm sorry, that private room is already in use by another customer."

"Just get them to change rooms. I'll pay you three times as much."

"I'm sorry, I cannot do that." Alphonse picked a fight, but the employee shook his head quietly.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“…Is the room really in use?” Alphonse said, doubting the employee’s words.

“Of course it is,” the man replied, nodding his head curtly. It was at this point that the girls accompanying them started looking concerned. They could tell that the scene was gradually worsening.

“Then I want to see with my own eyes whether it’s actually in use or not.” Perhaps the alcohol in Alphonse’s system gave him a confidence boost, or perhaps he was starting to get irritated at the employee’s resolute attitude, as he started walking with a sullen look.

“H-Hold on a minute, sir!” Naturally, the employee tried to stop him, but Alphonse didn’t waver. He continued his brisk walk forwards to the private room they had used before.

Alphonse’s bad habit is showing again, Stewart thought calmly when Alphonse started bickering with the employee, sobering up a little. It would be humiliating to back down in front of the girls they wanted to impress, so he decided that if worse came to worst, he could just let money handle the situation. Thus, they arrived before their target room, but the girls appeared to be frightened, which wasn’t ideal, obviously.

“We’re visiting as very important guests. The upper class of this city will hear of this,” Stewart said to reassure the girls.

“…If you’re referring to Lady Liselotte, then please, feel free to appeal to her directly. We are simply following our instructions.” The employee’s attitude became even more resolute in response to Stewart’s words.

What? I even prepared a point of compromise for him to accept. Stewart sulked for a moment.

“…What a stubborn fool. Enough — it’s no use speaking with you. You’d better watch your back later,” he found himself saying before he knew it.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“As you wish,” the inn’s employee replied bluntly.

Alphonse must have run out of patience, as he spoke up in irritation. “That’s enough, Stewart. We’ll settle this with the other customers ourselves.”

“You may not,” the employee protested.

“Move it. You’re in the way,” Alphonse declared loudly, forcibly pushing the employee out of the way.

“S-Sir! You cannot do this!” the employee yelled, but Alphonse was already standing before the door to the room, and opened it without knocking.

◇ ◇ ◇

“…What a commotion.” Rio glanced at the intruders and stood up with a sigh. For a brief moment, Celia took one look at Stewart and Alphonse’s faces and startled, but he didn’t notice.

…*Huh? These two?* Rio thought oddly. Like with Flora and Roanna, they seemed familiar. For now, he decided to treat them as though they were meeting for the first time.

Stewart and Alphonse were wearing their own clothing instead of their knight uniforms, but it was easy to tell at a glance that their clothes were of nobility. Behind them stood two girls looking idle, both wearing clothes that were stylish but slightly flashy.

The employee that had been shoved aside by Alphonse belatedly rushed into the room. At the same time, he turned to Rio’s party and bowed his head in a panic. “M-My deepest apologies, sir!”

“Could you explain what’s going on here?” Rio responded in a flat tone.

“Hm? You’re…” Stewart seemed to realize something, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

“…!” Celia flinched with her whole body, immediately ducking her head down. Stewart and Alphonse were two of

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

her former students — she was worried that they might have recognized her true identity.

“Aren’t you that Haruto guy?” Stewart stared at Rio and asked.

“…I’m sorry, and who might you be?” Rio returned curiously.

“Ah, forgive me. My knowledge of you was one-sided. I am Stewart Huguenot, and this is Alphonse Rodan. If I told you that we are knights from the group you saved today, would that ring a bell?” Stewart introduced himself smoothly as he studied Rio’s face.

“…Is that so? My apologies for the rudeness.” Rio tipped his head lightly in a show of politeness. Hearing their names had completely triggered his memories of the two. There was no way he could’ve forgotten, since this man was the root of all evil behind the false accusation placed on his head. Alphonse was his former classmate, too.

“No, that’s fine,” Stewart gloated with a smug huff. While things had taken a slightly troublesome turn, if the boy wasn’t a stranger to his family background, then everything would work out, Stewart thought confidently.

“…” In reality, the attendant seemed to be at a loss for what to do, seeing Rio and Stewart being acquainted already. The girls who had come along with them were also looking at Stewart in awe.

This is rather strange, Rio thought. “So, what brings you to this room?” he asked, just in case.

“We wanted to use this room.” Alphonse cut to the chase.

“This exact room?”

Alphonse’s declaration was so bold, Rio couldn’t help but react in shock. Upon closer inspection, Alphonse’s face was red: it was clear he was drunk.

This is why drunks are such a pain… No, not drunks. High and mighty nobles. Rio held back the urge to sigh and chose to leave quietly instead. It would be too much of a

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

bother to deal with these two any longer.

“We had just finished eating ourselves. Please, feel free to come in,” Rio said, sending a message to Celia and Aishia seated at the table behind him with a casual look. Aishia and Celia nodded silently and stood up.

“Wh…” It was at this point that Stewart and the others finally noticed Celia and Aishia. When they spotted the beauty of the girls, they couldn’t help but gulp.

“Come here, you two.” Rio guided Celia over, then stood as a wall between them and Stewart’s group. They briskly tried to make their way out of the room.

“Hey, hold on a minute,” Alphonse called out.

“Yes?” Rio replied, directly in the firing line.

“Let’s compromise. Why don’t you join us for a meal and drinks?” Alphonse extended a hand in invitation while looking at Aishia and Celia.

“While we are very grateful for the offer, we have unfortunately already finished eating and drinking,” Rio said, shaking his head bluntly.

“Oh? You’re rejecting our invitation?” Alphonse asked in a bold tone.

“I apologize. It has been a long journey here.” Rio’s answer did not change. While his words were courteous, his approach to rejection was firm.

“I see. I can’t say I’m impressed at how you’re rejecting a noble’s invitation. You may be skilled at the sword, but you’re still a commoner, no? Isn’t that right, Stewart?” Alphonse said with condemnation, turning to Stewart for backup.

After a short pause, Stewart nodded and looked towards Aishia and Celia. “…Yes, I suppose I do agree.” He figured Rio was staying at this inn as Liselotte’s savior and guest, so he didn’t think it would be smart to act too strongly before him. However, he also thought it’d be a shame if Aishia and Celia were to depart like this.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“I ask for your leniency.” Rio showed no sign of faltering at their roundabout threats and shook his head respectfully, moving to take his leave.

“Hey, hold on. You can’t gain social position through your sword hand alone. It’d be a shame, what with skills as wonderful as yours. Don’t you have some interest in climbing up in the world? Depending on your attitude, we could put in a good word for you to become a knight.” Alphonse was also a stubborn man, and flaunted gains to attempt at some level of negotiation.

“I’m fine as is. And I am tired, so if you’d excuse me.” Rio continued to shake his head bluntly. Sensing that the atmosphere had turned sour once again, the two girls that had accompanied Stewart and Alphonse shrunk back into the corner.

“Sir, if you bother our other customers any more than this, I’m afraid we will have to respond appropriately on our part too…” The male employee’s face had also grown pale, but even he felt the need to intervene here and gave a warning to keep them in check.

“Alphonse, I think this is eno…” Stewart tried to warn. While it would result in utterly destroying their reputation, he turned to self-preservation as things started to get out of hand.

“…No, hold on. I’ll try one last time. At the very least, how about those two stay with us instead? How about it, girls?” Alphonse seemed to be past the point of no return, desperately holding back his irritation as he addressed Aishia and Celia in a gentleman-like manner.

“…” However, both Aishia and Celia held their silence and ignored him like Rio had told them to. “Kuh…” Alphonse must have considered this a great humiliation, as his face twisted greatly.

“Now, if that was all you needed. We shall take our leave…” Rio sighed flatly, giving Celia and Aishia a gentle

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

nudge in the back to move them out of the room. On their way past the male employee, he leaned in to whisper, “I’m sorry for the commotion. Oh, and there is no need to report this to Lady Liselotte either, if you so wish.”

It was the least he could offer in gratitude for the employee’s attempts at protecting them. He didn’t want him to feel responsible over such a ridiculous matter.

“M-My deepest apologies!” The employee bowed his head in a fluster. He had been given strict orders from Aria to treat Liselotte’s savior with the utmost hospitality, yet this had happened. Meanwhile, Stewart’s face darkened uncomfortably as he realized their mistake, while in contrast, Alphonse allowed his rage to completely consume him.

“...Hey, wait,” he muttered furiously, but Rio did not stop walking.

“I told you to wait!” Alphonse finally yelled. He stood before the door, blocking their path.

“Yes?”

At Rio’s nonplussed question, Alphonse glared at him with hostility. “You dare insult me?”

“A-Alphonse!” Stewart hurriedly tried to stop Alphonse, but he ignored Stewart’s attempt at restraint and flared up at Rio.

“It seems you don’t know how to behave before a noble.”

Instead of considering his options logically, his humiliated emotions were completely leading the way. Being born and raised as the son of a high-ranked noble meant he had never needed to learn how to control his temper as a child, making him easier to anger.

“Unfortunately, I was born as a commoner, so I do not. Have I unknowingly done something to offend you?” Rio cocked his head curiously. While his choice of words were polite, his phrasing was provocative. It was the ultimate move of superficial manners.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Celia saw through that side of Rio and made a worried face out of nervousness. Aishia grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

“Ha… Hahaha… I never expected a mere commoner to make this much of a fool out of me. I see you think so highly of yourself, with your common sword and common women. But I can use my right to strike at any moment, you do realize?” Alphonse said with a twitching smile. The right to strike was a special privilege for nobility that allowed them to kill when their honor was compromised.

“Oh my. I’ve heard that the requisites for the right to strike can be extremely severe depending on national or territorial laws. Which requisite have I fulfilled in dishonoring you?” I’d like to see you try, was what Rio was strongly implying. The requisites for right to strike were to be investigated after the action was performed, but if Alphonse tried to declare he was dishonored by being ignored when flirting with girls while drunk, he’d be completely ridiculed.

Not to mention the fact Amande was under Liselotte’s governing. It would be one thing if they were within the Kingdom of Beltrum where Alphonse had influence, but there was no way that nonsense would be accepted in another country.

That being said, a commoner with no knowledge of how the right to strike worked would have cowered in fear by now, yet Rio did not falter an inch.

“Guh…” Having the faults in his request so easily raised had Alphonse glaring at Rio hatefully. Even he knew he was at a logical disadvantage. However, his haughty pride wouldn’t allow him to back down to a mere commoner after being humiliated so much already.

“Have you had enough yet?” Rio could no longer hide his exasperation in his question to Alphonse.

Alphonse stared at Rio sharply. Out of the blue, he lunged

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

forward at Rio with his fist held high. “Shut the hell up, you lowly commoner!”

“Kyaa!” Celia screamed from behind Rio. He couldn’t avoid him by stepping to the side, nor could he step backwards, either.

Thus, Rio engaged with Alphonse from head-on. After grasping the arm that had been raised in a punch, he gracefully pinned Alphonse down to the ground.

“Ow!” Alphonse cried out, the pain unbearable.

“Wha…?!” Stewart’s gaze was stolen by how skilful Rio’s restraint techniques were. He had no idea what movement was taken just now to restrain Alphonse so well.

“A-Alphonse! Hey, you! Release him!” Stewart objected, having returned to his senses after a moment. In that time, Aishia took the chance to pull Celia’s hand and place distance between themselves and Rio.

“I’m afraid I must object to that. If I release him, he’ll attack me right away.” *It’s legitimate self-defense,* Rio thought flatly.

“S-Shut up!” Rio’s response seemed to have touched a nerve, as Stewart tried to grab at him. At that, Rio swiftly stood up and evaded Stewart’s hand, and as a result, Stewart’s momentum caused him to stumble over his feet.

“Grr…!” He corrected his balance immediately, now glaring at Rio angrily. The now-released Alphonse also struggled to his feet.

“You’ve done it now, you bastard!” Alphonse yelled, lunging again to punch him. However, Rio evaded his fist lightly, all while barely moving from his spot.

“Kuh!” Alphonse completely snapped, continuing to swing his fist. Rio finally had enough and sighed in exasperation, slapping away Alphonse’s fist. Then, he grabbed Alphonse’s arm and twisted it while standing up.

“Gwah?!” Alphonse’s face twisted.

“Alphonse? Wha?!” Stewart tried to jump to his rescue,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

hurriedly grabbing Rio. However, Rio shoved Alphonse's body away, sending the two of them falling over each other dramatically.

"Guh..." Everyone other than Aishia averted their eyes at the pitiful scene.

As a result, silence fell over the room. During that time, Rio silently moved his body, approaching where Stewart and Alphonse had fallen over each other. He pushed them both down from above, easily restraining them.

"Guh, hey!"

"What do you think you're doing?! Let go, dammit!"

Stewart and Alphonse complained in an unsightly way, but Rio paid them no heed. He continued to restrain them without letting his guard down.

However, he couldn't remain in this position forever. Rio sighed in annoyance before addressing the employee, who was standing still in a daze. "Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like this can be settled peacefully after all. Could you please call someone here who can deal with these two appropriately?"

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Chapter 4: Apology

Later that night, in an office inside Liselotte's estate in Amande…

"…And that is what happened. The employee inside the room and staff outside the room were all present for the whole ordeal and their testimonies match each other, so it is safe to presume these as the facts," Aria reported to Liselotte and Duke Huguenot in a flat voice. She had just finished explaining the trouble Stewart and Alphonse had caused.

The guest chairs in the room were occupied by Liselotte and Duke Huguenot, who each had a pained expression on their faces. An uncomfortable air flowed throughout the room.

"…I am truly sorry for this," Duke Huguenot said after a pause. He was seated across from Liselotte; he bowed his head deeply at her.

"No… Well, let's see… For now, I'll accept your apology," Liselotte said, accepting Duke Huguenot's apology in a stuttering tone; she had no choice since something had in fact happened, and there were other things to prioritize before sinking time into finding out who was responsible right now.

"Those fools…" Duke Huguenot muttered under his breath in a terrifyingly cold voice.

"And what about Sir Haruto?" Liselotte sighed quietly before turning to address Aria.

"As it is already late at night and Haruto was the obvious victim in this case, on top of being our valued guest, I have asked him to rest at the inn. I did offer him an apology on the scene in a rush, but I informed him that you would be

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

apologizing to him directly tomorrow, master," Aria replied respectfully. She had been the one to gather all the details at the inn.

Stewart and Alphonse's fuss had been overheard by not only the staff, but some of the customers as well, so there was no way for them to excuse themselves.

Furthermore, the employee inside the room had given a testimony as a third party, and the staff on standby outside the room had also been watching the situation quietly, all confirming that none of the fault fell on Rio. On top of that, the girls who had gone there with Stewart and Alphonse testified that the two boys were the ones at fault once they had been removed from the room. They felt no reason to go out of their way to protect the two, especially once the person in charge of overseeing their city appeared in the flesh.

At that point, Rio was courteously returned to his room while Stewart and Alphonse were restrained and sent to Liselotte's estate. For the record, Celia and Aishia were returned to their rooms by Rio's judgment before Aria had arrived, leaving Rio alone to answer the questions but avoiding confrontation with Aria.

"...I see. Then I shall drop by tomorrow morning to apologize," Liselotte said with a bitter face.

This is the worst possible occurrence. I didn't want him to think of us as arrogant nobles... but an incident like this would definitely cause him to become more cautious.

There were many commoners that held the preconceived notion of nobles as arrogant. While that was due to the actual number of nobles that acted arrogantly towards common folk, Liselotte did not consider that a good thing. For a merchant like Liselotte, getting along with people began with trust — obviously, no one would form trade deals with someone they couldn't trust.

"Understood. Then, I shall make the appropriate

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

preparations,” Aria said respectfully.

“While I would like nothing more than to accompany you…” Duke Huguenot interrupted with terribly distraught words, trailing off.

“…It pains me to say this, but with your position as Sir Stewart’s father, it may be best if you didn’t appear before Sir Haruto, lest you make him more wary,” Liselotte said with difficulty. She feared that Rio would not wish to see the parent of an assailant, instead preferring to be apologized to directly by the perpetrator. Although that may not be the case.

“I figured.” Duke Huguenot frowned impatiently.

“Would you allow me to explain the situation on your behalf to Sir Haruto? After that, I shall prepare a proper opportunity for you to apologize,” Liselotte suggested for Duke Huguenot’s sake.

“Of course. Please tell him that I have nothing but good faith towards him and intend to settle my foolish son’s failures appropriately,” Duke Huguenot agreed immediately. It was extremely rare for someone in the position of a duke to apologize to a commoner, which was perhaps a sign of how highly valued the skills of the person named Haruto were.

“Understood.” Like Huguenot, Liselotte also valued Rio highly, and didn’t want their relationship to be ruined over such a trivial matter. That was why she needed to approach this with the utmost care and respect.

Tomorrow’s going to be a long day. Liselotte sighed quietly as to expel her exhaustion.

◇ ◇ ◇

After Duke Huguenot finished his discussion with Liselotte, he summoned Stewart and Alphonse to the guest bedroom he was staying in. As soon as he saw their faces,

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Duke Huguenot spat out scornful words filled with rage.

"You utter fools…"

"…" Stewart and Alphonse shook in absolute fear. They had completely sobered up already, their faces pale as ghosts.

"F-Father, I…" Stewart began to say something, but Duke Huguenot shut him up without hesitation.

"Silence. I barely had any expectations left for you, but this incident has left me in utter disappointment. I believe I told you before… that there would be no next time," Duke Huguenot said to Stewart, his words filled with cold rage.

"B-But…"

"I said — silence."

"…" Stewart had no other choice but to remain quiet.

"Ruining my relationship with a swordsman of that ability, smearing dirt over my name, and even causing Liselotte such great inconvenience. Rejoice, boy. Since you wish it so dearly, I will disinherit you," Duke Huguenot shot with a sneer.

"D-Disinherit?! Duke Huguenot, that's going too far!" Alphonse objected to Duke Huguenot in shock.

Disinheritance was a system that allowed the head of the family to revoke the right of inheritance to those who had the right to it. In terms of private punishments, it was the second most severe penalty after disownment. The moment disinheritance was announced publicly, Stewart would lose his position to become the next Duke Huguenot, so it was understandable that Alphonse would make a fuss.

"I do not recall allowing you to speak, either, Alphonse." Duke Huguenot said coldly, looking at him.

"B-But this is too much over a simple quarrel with a mere commoner, a swordsman!" Alphonse flared up, making light of Rio.

"A mere commoner? Him? Did you not witness his sword skills with your own eyes?" Duke Huguenot said, looking

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

down on Alphonse with contempt.

"...Sword skills aside, a commoner is a commoner!" Sensing he was being looked down upon, Alphonse argued back undauntedly.

"And what of it? Do you see yourself being far more skilled than him?" Duke Huguenot returned coolly.

"What did you say?!" For a moment, Alphonse forgot Duke Huguenot was ranked above him.

"You sure are an emotional person. I see... Perhaps you do suit the military more than politics. Though you'd be terribly incompetent either way," Duke Huguenot stated flatly.

Alphonse reached his limit. "H-How dare you! I don't care if you're a duke — take back those words right this instant!"

"I do not feel the need to. You are incompetent."

"Then — Then I'd like to hear the reason why you think I'm incompetent!" Alphonse said, breathing heavily through his nose.

"...Both Liselotte and I were discussing ways to scout him onto our side. Yet you, greatly misjudging his value, ruined that possibility. If that isn't incompetence, what shall I call it? He's capable of leading three minotaurs around by the nose. Could you do the same?" Heavily exasperated, Duke Huguenot asked his questions to provoke the younger man.

Three minotaurs. Since he had been there to witness them with his own eyes, Alphonse knew what a threat they had been. That's why Alphonse calmed down for a moment... And yet, he couldn't back down.

"...If I had an enchanted sword too, then yes."

"Enchanted sword? Hahaha. So, you're going for the sword next. Using an enchanted sword also requires an appropriate amount of talent. I do not see you possessing such talent for that." Duke Huguenot said, not even bothering to humor him.

Having just made a bold statement, Alphonse couldn't back down easily, either. "T-That's not true!"

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Even though the two of you tried to attack him, two-on-one, and had the tables turned on you instead?” Duke Huguenot said with a huff of laughter.

“Guh…” Alphonse’s face crinkled in humiliation, but suddenly, the direction of the conversation began to change.

“But, well… Since you’re willing to go that far, I can give you a chance to clear your name. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to look your father in the face,” Duke Huguenot suddenly said.

“I-I’ll do it! Please allow me to do it!” Alphonse offered without listening to the details. That was another part of him Duke Huguenot found incompetent, but he didn’t point it out.

Duke Huguenot calmed Alphonse flatly before he got to the point. “All right — just listen first. Considering the number of monsters that attacked us, Liselotte wants to investigate the forest to the west of Amande…”

“So you want me to assist in that investigation?” Alphonse asked angrily.

“Well, aren’t you quick on the uptake. There may be survivors of the monsters lurking in the woods… If you do well as an advance party, I can put in a good word for you to your father. Of course, if you fail, you’ll be sent back to Rodania and placed on house arrest.”

“Please, let me do this!”

“Very well. However, the condition is that you apologize to Haruto with sincerity.”

“Wha…!” Alphonse, who had been ready and raring to go, balked at the condition Duke Huguenot attached.

“Is something the matter? Whether you are a competent person or not is a different issue to apologizing for causing trouble. Naturally, you must settle those debts. I plan on negotiating with Liselotte to obtain such an opportunity for you to do so. Oh, and make sure you apologize to her, too,” Duke Huguenot said, cornering Alphonse with his well-

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

reasoned logic.

“I… I understand.” Alphonse clenched his teeth at the humiliation and nodded his head at the end. Before he knew it, he had no other options left.

“That is good to hear. Then, shall we practice? Apologize for causing me inconvenience with this incident. Put your heart into it. That goes for you too, Stewart,” Duke Huguenot demanded nonchalantly.

“Wha…?” The sudden demand caused Stewart and Alphonse to both freeze inadvertently.

“What’s the matter? I told you to apologize.” Duke Huguenot ordered coolly.

At that, his son shook with a flinch. “P-Please forgive me, father,” Stewart said reflexively.

“Guh… I’m sorry, Duke Huguenot.” With no other choice, Alphonse also apologized quietly.

“Worthless. You mean ‘please accept my apologies,’ no?” Duke Huguenot said to the two with heavy exasperation.

“Kuh…” Stewart and Alphonse both winced, but Duke Huguenot was completely serious. He didn’t intend on showing them any mercy.

“…Please, accept my apologies,” the two said with extreme discomfort, their voices nearly disappearing as they spoke.

“I believe I told you to apologize with sincerity. How about you at least lower your heads? Foreheads go against the ground. Can you not even do that?” Duke Huguenot spat with stern disappointment, not bothering to hide the exasperation in his voice.

“P-Please, accept my apologies…” Stewart prostrated himself on the ground in a fluster, heavily shaken up.

“Guh! S-Stewart!” Alphonse nearly burst in rage, but seeing Stewart fling aside his pride made him stop just before doing so.

“Is something the matter, Alphonse? If you refuse to do this, then you can forget what we just discussed. Otherwise,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

apologize now," Duke Huguenot urged Alphonse coldly.

"..." Alphonse's body was trembling with anger, but he dropped to his knees after a moment.

On this day, he experienced the greatest humiliation of his life.

◇ ◇ ◇

The next morning, Rio and the girls were having a peaceful breakfast together, completely at odds from the previous night.

"All things considered, last night was harrowing for a moment there. My heart's still pounding. You're sure it's okay now, right? We won't be involved in anything weird?" Celia checked with Rio worriedly.

"Yes. Aria has firmly sworn that nothing bad will come out of it for us. She wanted us to put our trust in Liselotte." Rio smiled with a nod to reassure Celia.

"I see..." Still, Celia nodded worriedly.

"...I'm sorry, I've caused you a lot of worry by going along with me. How about you and Aishia stay in the stone house from today onward instead?" he suggested. Celia had already been taking extra care not to run into her old friend Aria, and now she had been dragged into an incident with her former students in an unforeseen way. It had been one problem after another since yesterday.

"No! I'm fine, really!" Celia shook her head in a fluster.

"But..." Rio frowned.

"I'm fine, I said. It's not like issues like that will happen every day, right?" Celia said with a strained smile.

"But you won't be able to rest properly this way."

"That's okay. I don't want to be separated from you, anyway." Celia's will was firm — these were her true feelings.

"..." Unsure of what to say, Rio simply looked lost for words.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Ah, t-that’s just because I’m worried, though!” Celia must have found her words embarrassing, as her words came out in a fluster.

Rio giggled and smiled happily. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Y-Yeah. A-Anyway, isn’t it dangerous outside of Amande right now? With that many monsters lurking and all…” Celia said rapidly, trying to hide her embarrassment. However, she had a point: Amande’s outskirts were certainly dangerous at the moment. That being said, the outskirts of Amande being off limits didn’t prevent them from staying further away from the city, and with Aishia there, anything that could happen would be dealt with easily.

“…Yes, you do have a point,” Rio said, respecting Celia’s decision. “Then, we’ll continue to stay at this inn. Thanks anyway, Aishia.”

Aishia had been shoveling food into her mouth silently, but when addressed by Rio, she agreed quietly. “No worries. If worse comes to worst, we can just run.”

Rio was dazed for a second, before he chuckled. “…Just run. Run, huh? Ahaha, well, I guess.”

“Hey, it’s no laughing matter. What will we do if it really comes to that?” Celia complained, but she was smiling softly.

“Leave it to me. Running away from the oppression of power is my specialty,” Rio said jokingly with a shrug.

“Geez,” Celia murmured, smiling in a show of exasperation.

◇ ◇ ◇

After the three of them finished breakfast and returned to their rooms, Liselotte’s carriage arrived with almost perfect timing.

Liselotte stepped down from the carriage and brought only Aria as her attendant towards Rio’s room. Then, she knocked on the door politely.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

The door opened immediately and Rio stepped out. “Oh my, Lady Liselotte. Good morning to you.”

“Good morning, Sir Haruto — I apologize for intruding upon you so early in the morning. I am calling on you today to apologize for the incident last night and explain the particulars of how it was dealt with. May I have a moment of your time?” Liselotte bowed politely as soon as she saw Rio. Behind her, Aria also tipped her head.

“Yes, of course. I had heard from Aria in advance, but I didn’t expect you to pay a visit in person directly, Lady Liselotte. I would have gone to you if you had given the word.” Rio had assumed a messenger would come to summon him to her estate, after all.

“The one being apologized to shouldn’t have to answer to the whims of the one at fault,” Liselotte said with a troubled face.

“I appreciate your consideration. Please, do come in… If that is okay? Would you prefer somewhere else?” Rio seemed to feel Liselotte’s sincerity as he bowed his head in return and invited her inside the room. However, he hesitated as to whether or not it was appropriate to invite her into his room or change locations. Liselotte seemed to feel the same.

“Umm, anywhere you feel comfortable with is fine.”

“Then please, come inside,” Rio said, deciding to invite her in. “We may chat in the living room.”

It was a questionable choice to invite Aria into the same room as Celia, but since they were staying in such an extravagant inn for free, it was only proper to introduce them to the person who had paid them a direct visit. He planned to introduce Celia and Aishia to Liselotte and Aria quickly, then dismiss them afterwards. However —

“Understood. Then you shall remain here on standby,” Liselotte ordered Aria.

“Yes, my lady.” Aria nodded respectfully. Normally, it

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

would be unthinkable for someone as highly ranked as Liselotte to step into the domain of a fairly unknown stranger without a guard.

"...Then, this way." Despite being taken aback, Rio invited Liselotte into the room. He assumed it was another way for Liselotte to show her sincerity.

Celia and Aishia were waiting inside.

"Uh..." When Liselotte spotted them, her eyes widened in surprise. She often met with attractive people through her work connections, but these two were exceptionally beautiful. It was almost as though they had an aura that was impossible to put into words.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

W-Wow! Who are they? They're so cute! Both of them are too beautiful to be real! she thought to herself, surprised. However, she didn't let it show on her face at all.

"I've been staying in this room with the two you see over there. The blonde-haired girl is Cecilia, while the peach-haired girl is Aishia," Rio said.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Cecilia," Celia greeted first with refinement. Aishia also gave a formal greeting and bowed once.

"I'm Aishia. Pleased to meet you."

"...I'm Liselotte Cretia. It's nice to meet you. The two of you are both very beautiful." Liselotte returned the greetings in a slight daze, voicing her thoughts directly out loud.

"Why, thank you very much," Celia said with a sociable smile.

The Professor sure is used to this, Rio thought in awe at Celia's friendliness.

"Then, can the two of you wait in the room at the back? I have things to discuss with Lady Liselotte about last night."

"Yup, we know." Aishia nodded in agreement, heading for the back room.

Celia lowered her head respectfully before following Aishia. "Please excuse us."

"Have a seat, please." Rio offered Liselotte the head seat.

"...Yes, thank you. I'll sit over here." Normally, Liselotte would never hesitate before anyone no matter how highly ranked of a noble or wealthy of a merchant they were, but at this moment, she chose a lower seat with slight nervousness. She couldn't sit in the head seat when she had come to apologize.

Rio noticed how Liselotte's expression was rather stiff and spoke up as he remained standing. "Are you nervous, by any chance?"

Liselotte considered denying it for a moment, before agreeing. "No, umm... Perhaps."

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Actually, I feel the same. I’ll prepare tea first, so please wait a moment.”

Contrary to his words, Rio smiled gently. He stepped away to the mini kitchen in the room and returned with a tray soon after. He placed the tray on the table and sat down opposite to Liselotte.

“It’ll take some time for it to steam, so let’s start our discussion first,” Rio suggested in a calm tone.

“Umm, I’m sorry. I’m here to apologize, yet I’ve troubled you with such inconveniences.” Liselotte frowned somewhat dejectedly.

“It’s no trouble at all. All I’ve done is welcome you with some tea.” Rio shook his head with a friendly smile. That was enough to show that he wasn’t in a bad mood.

“I am most grateful. Then, without delay, may I once more offer my most sincere apologies for the trouble that happened at my store last night?” Liselotte bowed her head in shame and finally broached the main issue at hand.

“I don’t believe you have anything to apologize for regarding that incident, Lady Liselotte…” Rio said with a frown. The dispute last night was simply bad luck, he thought. He had no complaints about how the inn had handled it. If anything, the inn employee had tried to protect Rio and his party proactively, and Aria’s investigation was handled politely, too.

“No — it’s the inn’s duty to ensure the customer has a comfortable time. An issue like that should have been stopped before it reached you, and for that we will reflect deeply on how we can do better,” Liselotte said apologetically.

“But the ones who caused it were nobles. While they may have come from another kingdom, the difference in social status still made it difficult to react. In that regard, I believe the staff last night reacted in the best way possible,” Rio offered carefully.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

In a society with a class system, people were not equals. No matter how unfair it was, there were times when one had to endure. To upset those social ties and act however one pleased would be making an enemy of society itself.

"...What happened was disgraceful." Liselotte bowed her head with a shamed expression. Since the matter did involve nobles, it was true that the incident last night was beyond their means. Even so, the inn's handling should have been criticized — yet Rio didn't do that. That made it sting even more.

"It is what it is... We have no complaints about the inn staff nor you, Lady Liselotte. If anything, I am more concerned with my relations with the other two involved. How should I treat them from now on?" Rio asked, changing the topic. No matter the official verdict of no fault being placed on Rio's side, there was still the fear that those in power would hold a grudge against him.

"Duke Huguenot expressed his desire to apologize to you. He said the two who caused the commotion would receive their due punishments. He wished to convey his greatest sincerity."

"...Is that so." Rio nodded hesitantly. Nobles were known to be capable of acting the complete opposite of their words without batting an eye.

"If Duke Huguenot or the other two who caused the problem last night ever seek more trouble from you, I promise to stand on your side," Liselotte said, reading Rio's apprehensions.

"...Thank you very much. As for our side, in order to prove that this incident has been settled peacefully, it would be reassuring to receive a contract or documentation with compensation or a settlement."

"I understand. Then, allow me to assist in the documentation as the mediator." Liselotte immediately agreed.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

He seems used to this, she thought in awe at Rio's quick thinking. A contract would have the ability to deter recurrences. Experienced merchants would write one up whenever conflict arose, but writing contracts wasn't a thought process that most commoners would have. If Rio hadn't been the one to bring it up, Liselotte would have suggested it herself.

"Thank you very much." Rio smiled, reaching for the tea set on the table. After moving the hot water used to warm up the cups into a different receptacle, he started to pour the tea with experienced hands.

"…You seem very familiar with this," Liselotte commented in awe at Rio's skill.

"One of my companions is very fond of tea, so we often drink it together." Rio replied with a gentle smile.

"Is that so…" Liselotte uttered in an expression of interest. Meanwhile, Rio finished pouring the tea.

"Here you are. Be careful — it's hot," he said, offering it to Liselotte.

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to trying it," Liselotte said with a smile and sipped at the tea elegantly. "Delicious," she said with wide eyes.

The temperature, the time it was steamed, and the strength of the flavor was perfect. The tea leaves used were the highest quality Liselotte had hand-selected for the guest rooms, but the careful way each step was completed was what brought out the taste.

"It's an honor to hear that." Rio inclined his head as he took a sip of his own tea.

This is wonderful. On par with the tea Aria pours. Liselotte keenly savored the taste before letting out a small sigh of all her pent-up stress. These last few days had just been a series of one problem after another, accumulating quite a bit of mental exhaustion.

"I'm sure you must be very busy, so I shouldn't keep you

here for too long. Now that we've had a breather, shall we resume our previous discussion?"

"Yes. Then, in regards to the settlement contract, I shall first inform Duke Huguenot of the decision. Afterwards, I'll prepare a meeting between you and Duke Huguenot, so that the details may be discussed."

"I understand. I'm sorry to be a burden on you, but I thank you for your assistance." Rio bowed his head deeply.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble that has been caused for you, too."

"No, please don't let it bother you." Rio shook his head kindly at Liselotte, who had bowed her head in return.

"Much obliged. Also, if it is to your convenience, I'd like to invite you to lunch at my place today, as we promised earlier yesterday? Of course, your two companions are invited as well," Liselotte said.

"...I apologize. Could the two in my company please be excused? They're still a little tired and recovering from the shock of last night," Rio requested, conveying his intention to attend alone.

"I understand. They must have gone through a lot already. Please extend my apologies to them as well. If there is a chance in the future, I shall apologize to them directly, too," Liselotte agreed immediately, frowning in discomfort.

"Yes — I will pass the message on."

◇ ◇ ◇

After that, Rio and Liselotte went to her estate. It was still morning, so they decided to work on drafting the contract before their meal.

Rio was first led into a waiting room, where he didn't wait long before he was showed into a drawing room that Liselotte used on a daily basis. There, Duke Huguenot was waiting, opening his mouth to apologize to Rio before

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

anything else.

Liselotte must have caught Duke Huguenot up to speed while Rio was in the waiting room, as they immediately began drafting the contract. There was a standard form for settlement contracts which they used as a base to discuss the details of accordingly.

Normally, when discussing the conditions of a settlement contract, the perpetrator and the victim would negotiate the facts and conditions which the settlement agreed upon. If an agreement could not be reached, it was common for the conflict to arise once more, but this time even Rio was surprised by how cooperative Duke Huguenot was. Duke Huguenot was meant to be present as Stewart and Alphonse's representative, but he accepted all the facts and continuously suggested conditions that were favorable to Rio.

For example, he presented a compensation sum far beyond a typical case like theirs, an order preventing Stewart and Alphonse from harming Rio and his two companions in the future, and the penalty should that be broken…

Meanwhile, all Rio would be burdened with was not being able to not mention the actions of Stewart and Alphonse to third parties, with no particular penalties if he broke this condition. Rio hadn't intended on spreading it anyway, so it wasn't a very cumbersome burden.

And so, all the compromises were made on Duke Huguenot's side. As a result, the contract draft was completed in a much shorter time than expected. Duke Huguenot took a breath and addressed Rio and Liselotte.

"I suppose this will do for now. Do the two of you have any other concerns?"

"I don't have any particular objections at this moment in time, but something may come to mind later. I'd like to think about this for a few days before officially executing the contract. Would that suit you, Sir Haruto?" Liselotte said,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

looking at Rio.

“Yes, I do feel that it is a little one-sided in favor of me, but if you don’t have a problem with that…” Rio nodded in slight confusion.

“Of course it would be, seeing as none of the fault was yours,” Duke Huguenot said with a sociable smile. It was hard to believe he was the same man who once placed a false accusation on an innocent Rio’s head, and turned Latifa into an assassin.

“…Thank you for your consideration.” Despite finding the whole thing rather uncanny, Rio bowed his head respectfully.

“Then for the detailed wording and creation of the original contract, can that be left to you as a third party, Liselotte?” Duke Huguenot requested.

“Yes, leave it to me.” Liselotte nodded readily.

Duke Huguenot bowed his head at Liselotte, then turned to face Rio and apologized once more. “Sorry for the trouble. And Haruto, I apologize again for everything. My foolish son’s actions have caused you great pain, and for that I am sincerely regretful for.”

“No — if the matter is settled completely, then I have no more concerns about this issue.” Rio shook his head.

“…It pains me to admit, but I didn’t have much time with my son when he was younger, being occupied with my duties. Unfortunately, he grew up into an indulgent son. However, I swear as his parent to have him atone for his sins properly. In order to do so, I have one request to ask of you…” Duke Huguenot said, watching Rio’s expression.

“What is it?” Rio tilted his head rather warily.

“If you would so allow it, could you give them the opportunity to apologize in person? They have deeply reflected on their actions since then. It may be for their own egos, but they wish to apologize to you.” Duke Huguenot said with a strained smile.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“…Sure, I don’t mind.” Rio nodded hesitantly.

“Thank you. Then, Aria. Could you bring them here?” Duke Huguenot called out to Aria, who was waiting in the corner of the room silently.

“Understood.” Aria nodded, opened the door, and stepped outside.

“They’ve actually been ready in the room next door. It shouldn’t take long,” Duke Huguenot admitted. Sure enough, Aria returned not even a minute later, opening the door.

“Excuse me. Go ahead.” After opening the door, Aria invited Stewart and Alphonse inside. The two of them were giving off an extremely gloomy air.

“…Excuse me.” The two entered the room, greeting in rather dispirited voices.

They sure did a 180. Rio’s eyes widened at the sudden change in Stewart and Alphonse. It was hard to think of them as the same people who had been harassing girls and messing around in high spirits the night before.

“Come here.”

“Yes, sir…” As ordered, they approached Duke Huguenot.

“Good for you — Haruto here has agreed to give you the chance to apologize. Make sure you give a proper apology and express your gratitude for his generosity,” Duke Huguenot stated to Stewart and Alphonse in a calm and low voice. Stewart took the lead in kneeling down on the ground before Rio.

“…Please, accept my apologies. I am deeply repentant of last night, where I became drunk and let things get out of hand.” Stewart said his words of apology towards Rio.

“Please, accept my apologies.” Alphonse said shortly, kneeling on the floor with his forehead to the ground. His voice and body were both trembling. Just what emotion was running through him? For Rio, who knew them from his school days, it was an absolutely shocking scene to witness.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

That being said, no matter how hard they had butted heads during their school days, Rio felt no satisfaction in watching them prostrate themselves forever. Rather, they were people Rio no longer cared about at all. It wasn't even a matter of forgiving them or not.

"...It's fine, please raise your heads." Rio said in a rather blunt voice, accepting their apologies at once. Liselotte watched Rio's face from the side as he did so.

After that display, Stewart and Alphonse immediately left the room. The remaining members exchanged pleasant talk until Natalie arrived and informed them that lunch had been prepared.

◇ ◇ ◇

Led by Aria and Natalie, Rio and the others entered the dining hall of the mansion. Inside the room was a long, rectangular dining table where Flora, Roanna, and Sakata Hiroaki were seated. There, Hiroaki was chatting away talkatively.

"Ah, Sir Haruto." When Flora noticed them entering the room, she called out to Rio with a friendly smile.

...*Me?* Rio was taken aback by the fact that his name was the one called out, rather than Liselotte or Duke Huguenot with him, but he didn't let it show on his face.

"It's a pleasure to be in your presence once again, Princess Flora. Lady Roanna and Sir Hiroaki, too." Rio placed his right hand over his chest and bowed his head respectfully.

"Yo, I heard about the mess you had to deal with," Hiroaki said to Rio.

"Not at all, everything was resolved without any issues in particular," Rio replied with a strained smile.

"Really. Well, sit down then," Hiroaki invited Rio to sit as though it was his own house.

"Yes, please have a seat. Sir Haruto, Duke Huguenot,"

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Liselotte urged.

“Then I shall intrude on your table.” Duke Huguenot showed no sign of hesitation as he calmly lowered himself into a seat.

“This way, Sir Haruto.” Aria selected a seat for Rio and pulled it out quietly in invitation.

“...Then, excuse me.” Rio sat down nervously; Flora was seated right next to him.

“Umm, I know we’re all seated already, but is it okay for us to join you too?” Flora asked, peering up at Rio’s face beside her.

“I believe that, if anything, I should be the one asking if I may be here with everyone else?” Rio thought he’d be having lunch with only Liselotte and Duke Huguenot, so he was taken aback. Incidentally, Liselotte hadn’t known Flora and the others were inside the room until she entered herself, but had arranged for her attendants to prepare in advance either way, so she wasn’t particularly surprised.

“Eh, I’m sure it’s fine. This is a gathering of appreciation for you, after all. Having a meal with a hero and princess is a rare experience. Feel privileged, yeah?” Hiroaki huffed with a smug look.

Despite Rio being the main focus of the gathering, Hiroaki was acting like he was the master of the house. That being said, he was the hero on par with a servant of god, so it was endearing in a way.

“Yes, it’s an honor,” Rio agreed amicably.

“It isn’t meant to be a formal event, so please relax and enjoy yourself. The highest quality foods have been prepared for today,” Liselotte said somewhat apologetically. Even though she’d set up the event to show appreciation, Rio was being made to accommodate others even now.

Rio put on a sociable smile and thanked her cheerfully. “Thank you for your consideration.”

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

◇ ◇ ◇

Afterwards, Liselotte's attendants carried the dishes in and the group promptly began their lunch party. Because it wasn't a formal event, the meal wasn't served in full-course style, but rather all brought out at once and laid out on the table like a feast. If anyone wanted a second serving of something they liked, they would ask the attendants to serve some for them.

The seating order was also informal. Hiroaki took up camp at the end seat, with Roanna seated beside him and Flora seated opposite. Beside Flora sat Rio, and next to Rio was Liselotte, whereas Duke Huguenot was seated opposite to Liselotte.

"The meat is top grade, as usual. I can tell it has been grilled properly as well. The chefs at Liselotte's mansion sure know their stuff," Hiroaki said with a satisfied expression, cheeks stuffed with steak.

"I am much obliged," Liselotte said with a smile.

"But… eating good meat always makes me want rice too," Hiroaki sighed quietly.

"I've actually used my connections with the Ricca Guild to prepare some rice…" Liselotte said, her expression somehow not looking too pleasant.

"What, really?" Hiroaki asked, showing a strong interest.

"Yes. You previously expressed your desire to eat rice, so I had some prepared exactly as the hero described. Aria—" Liselotte said, calling out to Aria, who was waiting in the room.

"Yes, my lady." Aria nodded quietly, moving to stand before a small pot left on the waiter's table. She served a small amount of rice onto a plate and carried it over to Hiroaki.

"This rice is supposed to be eaten as porridge, like threshed wheat. It's only cultivated in certain parts of Strahl

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

and not particularly favoured by royalty or nobility, so I'm sure it must be the first time some of you may be seeing it," Liselotte said, addressing everyone seated at the table.

In Strahl, it was common for grains other than rice to be used for porridge, but porridge itself was looked down upon by the noble class as something for the lower classes to eat. It would normally be impolite to bring that ingredient to the dining table of royalty and nobility, but it was a different story if Hiroaki, the hero, desired it.

"So this is the rice that Sir Hiroaki often spoke of..." Flora looked at the plate before gazing at Hiroaki with curiosity.

There was rice in Strahl, too? Rio's eyes widened at that fact.

"Haha, I see. Well, I guess I could give it a try." Hiroaki picked up his fork and scooped some rice, staring at it with a grin on his face before carrying it to his mouth.

"...Is it to your liking?" Liselotte asked quietly.

"Ah, this is definitely rice. It's rice, but not the rice I want." Hiroaki shook his head in disappointment.

"So, it isn't satisfactory after all," Liselotte said with a wry smile, as though she expected that reaction.

"...What do you mean?" Flora asked curiously, cocking her head.

"It's dry and the rice grains don't stick to each other at all. To put it simply... it's bad. It's not the type of grain that should be cooked and eaten in this way to begin with. Though it probably tastes good if you make it into porridge and season it..." Hiroaki explained in Liselotte's place.

"I agree. That's why I had my chefs experiment and make something delicious to eat. Would you like to give their cooking a try?" Liselotte immediately suggested to Hiroaki.

Interest piqued, Hiroaki nodded heartily. "Oh? You sure are well prepared. As expected of you. Sure, bring it out."

"Then, Aria. Please prepare enough for everyone."

"Yes, my lady," Aria agreed respectfully and began serving

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

with the other attendant girls. Before long, two plates appeared before Rio. One had regular white rice, while the other one had the risotto.

“Everyone, please feel free to try and compare the differences between two types of cooked rice,” Liselotte stated cheerfully.

“What an interesting idea… I shall give it a try. Hmm…” Duke Huguenot said, starting with the white rice.

Meanwhile, Hiroaki had already eaten the risotto. “It’s great! It’s just like cheese risotto!” he said happily.

“Thank you. I see Sir Hiroaki knows about this dish, then. As you can see, it uses cheese. Did you say it was called risotto?” Liselotte asked curiously while smiling.

“Yeah, it’s the name of a similar food in my world. It was prepared in a different way compared to porridge, right?” Hiroaki nodded, confirming with a knowing look.

“Yes, it is as you discerned. The name of the food hasn’t been decided yet, so we will take this chance to name it after your risotto,” Liselotte said with a grin.

“Sure, I don’t mind.” Hiroaki nodded contently.

…This hero, does he not realize that Liselotte could have recreated this risotto using Earth knowledge? Rio doubted in his head. However, at present, he had no reason to interrupt and ask, and was content to observe quietly without overstepping.

Flora also took a bite of the risotto and offered her thoughts with a beaming smile. “This… risotto, was it? It’s very delicious.”

“Yes, I’m surprised.” It seemed like Roanna was also pleased with the taste. Duke Huguenot was also smacking his lips in awe.

“My compliments to the chef. To think a grain food could taste this good…”

“I am pleased to see it was to your liking.” Liselotte accepted their reactions happily, before turning to ask Rio

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

who had just taken a bite of his risotto too. “What did you think, Sir Haruto?”

“It’s wonderful. I never imagined I’d be eating rice again,” Rio said with a smile. Liselotte looked at him, surprised.

“…Is it possible that you’ve eaten rice before, Sir Haruto?”

“Yes, actually. During my travels across various lands.” Rio disclosed just enough information that was within the truth. In actuality, he ate rice on a daily basis and often made risotto to eat, too, but decided against saying that out loud.

“Umm, how old were you when you started your journey, Sir Haruto?” Flora asked nervously, interested in Rio’s travels.

“…I was eleven years old.” Rio answered with the same number he gave Aria before, staggering the year he began his journey by one year. Rio had fled from the kingdom of Beltrum when he was in his sixth year of the Royal Academy, so he was actually twelve.

“Eleven…” Flora muttered quietly, seemingly frustrated.

Hiroaki narrowed his eyes at Flora’s expression. “Come to think of it, how old are you?” he asked Rio.

“I am sixteen.”

“Oh. So, the same age as Roanna… And one year older than Flora and Liselotte. But how did you travel from such a young age? In this world, you have to walk everywhere if you’re not a noble. Well… I guess it’s possible this has something to do with your parents?”

“No, both my parents died before I started my journey. I mostly traveled alone, but I did travel with others for part of the way.”

“Ah, I see. So your parents have passed already. Sorry for asking about that.” Even Hiroaki was able to sense the mood and scratched his head awkwardly.

“No, don’t let it bother you.” Rio shook his head with a smile.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

However, Flora pushed further in questioning Rio. “Umm, then why did you choose to travel alone, Sir Haruto? Didn’t you have somewhere you were living before?”

At that, Liselotte, Roanna, and Duke Huguenot all widened their eyes in curiosity, finding it to be an assertive stance for Flora.

With a pensive look, Rio searched for the right words. “Actually, I was searching for a person connected to my deceased parents. My parents were nomads to begin with, so they barely had any acquaintances in the area, and weren’t very attached to the land, either.”

“...Then where did you live originally?” Flora asked further. Her posture had completely turned to face Rio beside her, staring at his face closely.

“Hey, now. Flora. Aren’t you prying into his past a little bit too much now?” Unable to continue to simply watch, Hiroaki admonished Flora.

Flora gasped as she came to her senses. “Ah, no... umm. That’s not what I intended... Please forgive me!” she apologized to Rio in a panic.

In order to avoid making Flora feel bad, Rio shook his head with a friendly smile. “No, don’t worry about it. If anything, I’m sorry for not having anything more interesting to say.”

“No, no — your story was of great interest to me. But setting the past aside, do you plan on ever settling somewhere eventually?” Duke Huguenot shifted the focus of the questions from Rio’s past to his future.

“That’s a good point. I’m still in the middle of my journey, so I’m not sure yet.” Rio dodged the question with a forced smile on his face.

“Hahaha. In that case, feel free to place the Kingdom of Beltrum in your sights as a place of permanent residency. With your sword skills, I’d hire you on good terms.” Duke Huguenot tried to scout Rio with determination, all while

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

wearing a bright smile.

“Oh, my. If we’re talking about a swordsman of Sir Haruto’s level, I’d like to put my name out there, too.” Liselotte kept Duke Huguenot in check immediately.

“My my, it seems a rival has appeared already.”

“Fufu, but of course. I won’t let you get the lead right in front of my eyes.”

“Hahaha. We cannot remain in Amande forever, after all. We’re always in need of talented people, so being able to meet someone like this is a valuable opportunity. I must make the most of it,” Duke Huguenot said pleasantly, looking at Rio.

“...I am grateful for the offer. If fate ever leads me there, I will rely on you at that time,” Rio said, giving a diplomatic and safe reply.

“Hmm. Seriously speaking, we would be able to provide somewhere for you to use your sword skills as much as you want. And a career path upwards, too. Feel free to consider it as one of your options in life.” Duke Huguenot didn’t seem to have any intentions of allowing the conversation to end with lip service, appealing rather enthusiastically. However, he didn’t try to step forward too forcefully, wary of the trouble that Stewart and Alphonse had caused earlier.

“I will also be willing to welcome you at any time,” Liselotte reminded Rio casually.

“Wow, look who’s the talk of the town. Is this the birth of a new hero?” Hiroaki said, putting a damper on things.

“No, that would be out of the question. I would be no match for a real hero like you. The legend speaks of the ability to wipe out armies of monsters in a single blow, after all. If that were true, taking out a mere handful of minotaurs would be laughable in comparison,” Rio denied rather exaggeratedly, while also flattering Hiroaki for being a hero in the process.

“Ah, well. No matter how much effort you put in, real

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

heroes have a status and power limited to only them. The wall that a fake could never surpass, or so they say. But if you're aware of that, then maybe you might make it somewhere too." Hiroaki smiled, now in a good mood.

"That's very kind of you to say." Rio bowed his head respectfully.

Meanwhile, Liselotte was watching Hiroaki with a worried face. "Oh, speaking of heroes. How much have you heard about the heroes being summoned all over the land, Sir Haruto?"

"Let me think... I've heard that the areas where pillars of light appeared were where the heroes were summoned. The rumors said that a hero appeared in the kingdom of Galarc too..." Rio took the opportunity to ask about the Galarc Kingdom hero. Finding more information about the Galarc Kingdom hero was one of his goals for getting close to Liselotte, so he was quite grateful for the topic at hand being brought up.

"The castle technically hasn't released any information to the townspeople yet, but it's hard to hide pillars that rose up so conspicuously," Liselotte said with a strained smile.

"Ah, they said they would introduce her officially at the evening party, didn't they? The female hero of Galarc." Hiroaki said, sighing tiredly.

"An evening party... and a lady?" Rio asked hesitantly, stifling his overeager emotions.

"Yes, Lady Satsuki Sumeragi. That's the name of the hero summoned in our kingdom."

Sure enough, the woman was of the same name and gender as the person Rio was searching for.

"Lady Satsuki Sumeragi..." It couldn't possibly be a coincidence. Rio was certain that the hero summoned in the Galarc Kingdom was Miharu's upperclassman. Obtaining this information alone had made getting so close to Liselotte worth it.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Actually, Sir Hiroaki is also set to attend that party. We also plan on unveiling him there,” Duke Huguenot said while looking at Hiroaki.

“Well, I’m not a big fan of being put on stage, but I guess this is another part of being a hero.” Contrary to his words, Hiroaki shrugged with a smile that didn’t seem all that displeased.

“…It sounds like quite the high-class event.” Rio said, eyes wide.

“Actually, there are rumors the hero summoned in the Kingdom of Centostella will also be in attendance. It’s not confirmed, though, and the hero’s name is also hidden still,” Duke Huguenot said.

“Oh my…” Rio uttered in interest.

Finally, a big leap in progress. I can tell Miharu and the others the good news too.

He sighed in relief at the situation finally taking a turn for the better.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Interlude: A Day in the Life of Miharu

Meanwhile, in the spirit folk village, Miharu was working hard at spirit art drills with Aki, under the guidance of Orphia.

"Hmph..." Aki groaned as she held her hand out in the empty space before her. Miharu also had her hand out before her, a water bubble several centimeters in diameter floating on her palm.

"That's amazing, Miharu. Both your spirit art activation time and the size of the bubble has visibly developed in these last few days!" Orphia said, her eyes widening when she saw Miharu's improvement.

"Thank you. I think I'm starting to get the hang of it. It's all thanks to you, Orphia," Miharu replied bashfully. She concentrated once again, turning her focus back to the use of spirit arts.

Aki stared at Miharu closely. "...I wonder what the difference is between Miharu and me. Is it really talent after all?" she murmured, frowning in disappointment. The more days went by, the greater the gap between her and Miharu grew, which probably made her feel impatient. While Aki's murmurs didn't reach Miharu in her concentration, they definitely reached Orphia's ears.

Miharu's talent is wonderful, of course, but... Orphia looked at Aki's face before staring at Miharu's serious side profile. While Orphia had no experience teaching spirit arts to a human outside of her experience with Rio, it was obvious that Miharu's talent in spirit arts was clearly at an

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

abnormal level.

That being said, Rio was a particularly unique exception for a human, and there was still the question of whether to group Miharu and the others as humans of this world when they had come from Earth. The only thing that was certain was that not only Miharu, but Aki and Masato too, were acquiring spirit arts at an incredible speed compared to the humans of this world. It was why Orphia repeatedly reminded Aki that there was no need for her to feel dejected. Unfortunately, it seemed there was no way to stop Miharu's overwhelmingly rapid progress from making her feel inferior. Aki found herself feeling hopeless on occasion.

I wonder what the difference is between Miharu and Aki? Is it really just talent in the end? I don't want to brush it off with that one excuse. The one who's been working the hardest with her more mature age has been Miharu, after all. She's concentrating really hard right now, too…

Miharu's expression was the portrait of determination. Orphia also knew that Miharu had been tirelessly working away outside of their practice hours, too.

In contrast, possibly due to her attention being taken away by Miharu's growth, Aki's mind seemed rather restless at times. She didn't seem to be having any distractions in her daily life, and while one option was to keep observing quietly for a little longer, Orphia found herself racking her brains as to why she couldn't lead Aki better as both her elder and spirit arts instructor.

It might be best to talk to Miharu about it after all. I have things I want to discuss with her anyway, and she should know Aki best. Orphia may have been her instructor in spirit arts training, but Miharu was actually one year older than Orphia, so she felt like she could rely on her at a time like this.

Okay. I'll do it tonight right away! And I'll have to call Sara and Alma over too!

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

With that decided, Orphia giggled to herself.

◇ ◇ ◇

That night, in the village house where they all lived together…

After the younger group of Latifa, Aki, and Masato had gone to sleep, Orphia brought Sara and Alma along to Miharu's bedroom and knocked quietly on the door.

"…Yes? What's wrong, everyone?" Miharu was still awake, so she opened the door immediately. When she saw the older group of girls gathered outside, her eyes widened slightly.

"Fufufu, could the four of us have a little talk?" Orphia suggested to Miharu with a smile.

It was basically an invitation for an other-world version of a pajama party, and Miharu and the spirit folk girls were already in their sleepwear. While the residents of the house would regularly gather in the living room to drink tea at night, it was rare for only the older girls to gather together, much less visit Miharu's bedroom.

"Sure, come in." Miharu readily welcomed the three girls inside.

"Thank you." Orphia and the others entered the bedroom happily. Miharu's room was roughly 15 square meters large, with a small table in the corner of the room. Orphia placed the tray on that table.

"Were you practicing spirit arts just now?" Sara asked, looking around the room.

Miharu nodded hesitantly. "Ah… yeah. How did you know?"

"There are remnants of ode and mana waves flowing through your room. The ode density was greater than what the light artifacts give off, so I guessed you were practicing in secret," Sara deduced with a giggle.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“I see…” Miharu mumbled quietly at Sara’s observational skills. The spirit art she had been using was an extremely minor one, but constantly repeating it had caused a significant amount of magic essence to be released without her realization.

“It seems like you were practicing a fair bit. You’re such a hard worker, Miharu.” Alma giggled.

“T-That’s not true.” Miharu shook her head in discomfort. It wasn’t as though practicing in private had been forbidden, but overworking would cause exhaustion and wasn’t recommended. She had been practicing spirit arts for nearly an hour before the girls had arrived, but she didn’t want to worry them.

However, Miharu couldn’t fool the eyes of Sara and the others, who were known as the leading talents in spirit arts in all the village.

“I can tell even if you try to hide it. It’s good that you’re hard-working, but when you’re a beginner, you have to be careful not to practice too much,” Sara warned Miharu with an exasperated tone.

“That’s right. I’ve told you many times already, but if you release too much ode from your body while you’re still inexperienced, you could ruin your health, you know?” Orphia noted, emphasizing Sara’s words with her own.

“I agree,” Alma nodded along.

“Ahaha, I don’t feel particularly bad or anything, so I’m sure it’s fine. I won’t practice anymore today. Now, have a seat.” Miharu laughed a little awkwardly, urging Sara and the others to sit.

“Okay. Excuse me.” Sara gave a helplessly strained smile before sitting down on a chair. Alma and Orphia followed her, and Orphia immediately began pouring tea.

“We normally gather in the living room, so meeting up in someone’s bedroom is a new feeling,” Alma said as she looked around the room.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“I agree. If we’re the only ones gathered, does that mean you have something important to talk about?” Miharu asked somewhat curiously, nodding while she gazed at their expressions.

“How about it, Orphia?” Sara must have been summoned by Orphia without knowing what the matter at hand was, as she tilted her head in question.

“Fufu, I suppose you could call it important. I wanted us to have a talk about Miharu, Aki, and Masato once more, just between the four of us,” Orphia said with a bright smile.

“Well, it’s true that we haven’t had the opportunity to discuss this…” Sara looked back on their living together until now with a thoughtful face. While she accepted Orphia’s reason more or less, she suspected that there was another motive behind it.

“Right.” Orphia clapped her hands together in front of her chest. “And so, Miharu… How has life been in the village? Do you have any worries, any woes? Anything that makes you anxious?”

“Huh? Umm… Not really, I guess?” Miharu was taken aback by the sudden interrogation, cocking her head as she replied.

“Really?” Orphia asked once more, peering at Miharu’s face.

“…Yeah. That’s the truth,” Miharu confirmed hesitantly.

“Do you suspect otherwise, Orphia?” Sara asked, cutting straight to the point.

“Hmm. It’s just the fact that they’re living in an unfamiliar village. I was wondering if they had any anxieties or problems outside of our knowledge. Not only for Miharu, but Aki and Masato too,” Orphia explained.

“I see. How about it, Miharu?” Sara asked.

“I haven’t had a problem with life at the village. We’re treated so well — I can’t be grateful enough to Haruto and everyone here,” Miharu answered with a cheerful laugh.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Sara resolutely asked what she had feared bringing up. “But aren’t you lonely? You’ve been separated from your family, too.” In order to prevent that, Sara and the others had put their utmost effort into welcoming them warmly, but there was a limit.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t lonely, I think. As far as Aki, who at times doesn’t seem as energetic… She’s been separated from her beloved brother, so I think she ponders a lot about that,” Miharu uttered, showing a glimpse of a fleeting smile. “But I’m so grateful… my feelings of regret have all but dissipated. I truly believe we’re blessed to be in this situation right now. I’m so happy to have met everyone, you know?” She continued, laughing shyly.

“Miharu…” Orphia, Sara, and Alma all smiled quite happily.

“Of course, I believe Aki and Masato also feel the same way. That’s why, even if we might be lonely, we’ll be fine with everyone here. Thank you for always being with us.”

“We’re also grateful to have you guys here. I’m so happy we became friends,” Sara said with embarrassment.

“…Yeah.” Miharu nodded in a similar fashion.

“We’ll also try to keep an eye out for Aki and Masato, but please don’t hesitate to speak up if you need anything, Miharu,” Alma said.

“Thank you, Alma,” Miharu said happily. Orphia suddenly spoke up. “…How has your spirit arts training been going? I think Aki and Masato have been feeling a little impatient, as they’re unable to catch up to you.”

“Really? It didn’t seem like that to me…” Sara said in surprise.

“I could be overthinking things, but it seemed a little like that during training. I was wondering what she was like outside of training.” Orphia said, indirectly turning the question to Miharu.

“…I haven’t seen her bothered outside of training hours,

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

as far as I know. I'll also pay a little more attention from now on," Miharu answered with a contemplative look. "Thank you, Orphia, for watching Aki closely."

"It's nothing. When it comes to spirit arts, I'm meant to be your teacher, after all. Though I may still be lacking at times," Orphia said with a strained smile.

Miharu shook her head. "That's not true. The way you teach is so good — I can definitely tell I'm improving bit by bit," she said, advocating for Orphia as the secret to her rapid growth.

"That's because you're so talented. Not only that — the fact you're the hardest working when it comes to spirit arts training also plays a large part." No matter how much talent she had, it would've been wasted if she hadn't been motivated.

"And it seems like you've been practicing secretly too," Sara said with a laugh.

"I-It wasn't that much." Miharu defended herself in embarrassment.

"You seem really ambitious about it, but is there a reason why?" Alma giggled, wondering why Miharu worked so hard at it.

"Part of it is because it's fun, but..." Miharu trailed off halfway, causing Sara and the others to all urge her to continue in unison.

"But?"

"But even while we're living peacefully, Haruto must be working hard out there, right? I feel bad leaving everything for him to deal with like this..." Miharu replied bashfully, feeling everyone's attention gathered on her.

"I see, so it's for *Rio*'s sake." Alma seemingly emphasized Rio's name in understanding.

"Ufufu, I see. So that's how it is," Orphia said happily. Meanwhile, Sara was glancing at Miharu's expression silently.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“…Umm, is everyone misunderstanding something?” Realizing she was on the receiving end of the three meaningful gazes made Miharu blush.

“Misunderstanding what?” Alma asked back innocently.

“No, umm… I just don’t want to be a hindrance to Haruto like this. He saved us, so I want to increase the number of things I can do as much as possible… So the next time something happens, I can’t be left behind…” Miharu defended herself in a fluster, blushing all the more.

“Yes, it goes without saying that everyone understands your reason for working so seriously now.” Alma said, a gentle smile tugging at her lips.

“So you want to be with Rio.” Orphia said, nodding along.

“T-That’s not it! I-I mean, you’re not wrong, but!” Miharu objected in vexation. She was extremely frustrated at how she was unable to do anything in return for the person who had done so much for her, a stranger. She refused to be content at remaining a hindrance to him.

That was why Miharu worked so hard. If she at least became strong enough to protect herself, she could stay by Rio’s side. If she didn’t work hard while she could, it somehow felt like Rio would one day go somewhere far away. She didn’t want that to happen.

She didn’t want Rio to leave her behind. It was hard to describe using words, but she was utterly terrified of that happening.

“Well, if that’s why your spirit arts learning is going so fast, then it’s fine, right? Being able to reach activation in such a short time is an impressive feat, no?” Sara giggled, supporting Miharu with all she had.

“Right. It’s a result obtained by combining Miharu’s talent and hard work,” Orphia agreed with a grin.

“But even for that, I feel it’s a little too fast… Honestly, the speed is on par with the higher ranks of the village. Although there are barely any people who start learning at Miharu’s

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

age, so it simply may be a case of having nothing to compare with…" Alma said with a contemplative look.

"While I'd certainly understand if she had been contracted to some kind of spirit, that isn't the case for Miharu. Although, she is a citizen of another world, I suppose," Sara pondered out loud.

"Contracted to a spirit? Huh?" Miharu uttered, blinking as though she had realized something.

"Is something the matter, Miharu?" Orphia cocked her head and asked.

"This was before we came to the village, but I remember when Rio came here without us to explain the circumstances, Ai-chan formed a temporary pact with me in order to replenish her magic essence," Miharu explained, the memory suddenly resurfacing from the back of her mind.

"…That's it," Orphia said with wide eyes. Sara and Alma also blinked in surprise.

"It's the reason why I can learn spirit arts so fast, right?"

"Yes. The connection used in a temporary pact cannot match that of a real contract, but Lady Aishia is a humanoid spirit. She must have awakened your talent in spirit arts," Sara explained.

"So that's how it was… I'll have to thank Ai-chan when she gets back." Miharu looked back on her memories with Aishia and found herself smiling with a giggle.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 5: Evils Lurking Near

Meanwhile, when Rio was dining together with Liselotte at her estate, by her invitation…

Alphonse Rodan had apologized to Rio, split ways with Stewart Huguenot, and was visiting the forests to the west of Amande with a few other knights.

Alphonse was currently walking along the road to the west; his goal was to, of course, investigate the cause of the huge spawns of monsters and confirm that no more savage monsters lurked in the woods. In other words, a reconnaissance in force. At the request of Duke Huguenot, an advance party was formed consisting of mostly knights traveling together with them, which he was made to join on their mission.

Incidentally, Stewart was confined to house arrest on Duke Huguenot's order, remaining at the mansion. The fact he gave Alphonse a chance to clear his name but not his own son was probably because he had showed consideration for Marquess Rodan's house.

Fuck this! I'll never forget this — I'll never forgive this! Making me lose face like this… Alphonse was holding an irrational, deep-set grudge. Rio, Duke Huguenot, Aishia, Celia, Liselotte, Aria… he couldn't help but feel so much hatred for all the factors that stood in the way of what he wanted.

Why did I have to apologize to that filthy commoner anyway?! He was completely shelving the fact he had caused the problem, though he may have never considered it a problem to begin with, being that he thought he was a human of the privileged class.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Commoners should just shut the hell up and do as we say. Those women, too — they should have been grateful we bothered to lay our eyes on them. Getting ahead of themselves for looking a little attractive… Alphonse's rage did not calm. In the time between bowing at Rio's feet and moving to the forest, he had continuously simmered in his anger.

Of course, his apology had been for appearances only. Even if it was only in appearance, he had showed intent to apologize with his behavior. Duke Huguenot's intervention meant a settlement contract had been formed.

Alphonse could no longer touch Rio and the others. In other words — he had been utterly defeated. On top of that, Duke Huguenot had stamped him as an incompetent person.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! I'm not at fault! I'm not incompetent! Alphonse couldn't forgive the current situation. A high class and talented individual like him could not accept the fact he was being outright rejected by society.

…First is that damn duke. Just watch, you old fool. I'll show you what I'm worth. A strong desire to prove himself was welling up within Alphonse right alongside his rage. He wanted to prove Duke Huguenot wrong so much, he could barely stand it.

I'll definitely achieve something here. Alphonse harbored his ambitions with eagerness. He had been glaring around at the surrounding forest, searching for a target to vent his bitterness against.

"Oi, Alphonse. You've been restless for a while now. I get that you're annoyed at being scolded, but we're mid-mission right now. Get your head in the zone." The commanding knight of the investigation squad was unable to ignore Alphonse's clearly bad mood and gave him a warning.

"Tch," Alphonse clicked his tongue. The commanding knight was in his mid-twenties, normally acting as the vice-commander of Flora's elite guards, but Alphonse's family

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

was higher-ranked. Any speech from a person of lower social status would only fall upon Alphonse's deaf ears at the moment.

"...Hey, I don't like your attitude." The commanding knight frowned. Even if Alphonse was from a better house, he was the superior rank military-wise, and proud of obtaining his position through his own ability.

"That wasn't my intention. I'm just on edge from my hatred of monsters. More importantly, how long are we going to walk along this road for? Let's go into the forest already." Alphonse huffed with a rebellious attitude.

"...We are merely an advance party dispatched to strengthen guard patrol. Reconnaissance in force is part of our mission, but our goal is not to exterminate monsters," the commanding knight replied in an unhappy voice.

At that, the knights that had formed lines while on guard of their surrounding started being distracted by Alphonse and the commander's conversation.

"You say that, but what if a minotaur appears in the city?" Alphonse objected with a more aggressive attitude than usual.

"Cut that out already. That's why we're currently strengthening the city's security. It's not something for a mere foot soldier like you to worry about. You just follow your orders," the commanding knight scolded Alphonse a bit harshly.

"Hmph, what a coward..." Alphonse muttered quietly.

The commanding knight finally seemed to snap, arguing back aggressively. "And here I was being considerate, since you're clearly still a child. Would you like to head into the forest alone instead? You may be able to encounter a minotaur, as you seem to wish."

"Kuh..." Alphonse frowned deeply. No matter how hot-headed he was getting because of anger, he wasn't foolish enough to think he could defeat a minotaur alone.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“That will be unnecessary.” From out of nowhere, an unfamiliar man’s voice echoed loudly.

“Who’s there?!” The knights looked around them in a hurry. Two men appeared from the forest, stepping onto the road. One was Reiss, wearing a black hood to cover his appearance, and the other boldly had his face on full display. The man with his face revealed looked to be in his prime adult years, a sword hanging from his waist and in an outfit fitting for a mercenary. His name was Lucius. While his facial features were refined, he emitted a wild aura filled with confidence and spirit.

“There are no monsters in the forest right now,” Lucius said, approaching the knights without hesitation. Once he was within ten meters of the knights, the commanding knight shouted an order in a stern voice.

“Freeze!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Lucius did as he was told.

“Are you an adventurer of Amande?” the commanding knight asked.

“Nope, that I am not.” Lucius shook his head casually.

“…How suspicious. Then what were you doing in the forest?” The knights fixed their dubious gazes on Reiss, who was standing behind Lucius.

“Why, being suspicious people, of course. And would you lot be the knights from the Kingdom of Beltrum?”

“…How do you know that?” Lucius’ question made the knights all the more wary at once.

“Well, there is only one group of knights staying in Amande right now, after all. The elite knights escorting Princess Flora, that is.”

When Flora’s name came up, the knights expressions became even more grim. “…Who the hell are you?”

“I have a little business with you lot. Seems like there’s about twenty of you. And all youths, at that.” Lucius smiled with extreme cheerfulness, looking around at the knights.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Come to think of it, you were a former noble of Beltrum, weren’t you? Are there any faces you recognize?” Reiss asked from behind Lucius.

“Nope. But it wouldn’t change a thing if there was.”

“That’s good to hear. Their bodies will be satisfactory, so I’m counting on you,” Reiss said in a flat voice.

“What a pain. Should we just mess them up a bit and restrain them?” Alphonse drew his sword. It was the perfect opponent to take his irritation out on.

“Wait, I want to talk to them some more…” The commanding knight tried to continue with his interrogation, but —

“Hahaha, there’s a lively one among them. How nice.” Lucius looked at Alphonse’s face and laughed joyfully.

“Make sure you don’t kill them. Healing is troublesome, so don’t detach their limbs, either,” Reiss said tiredly to Lucius.

“I’m helping you out… At least let me have a little fun. You just make sure no one runs away,” Lucius replied apathetically, drawing a sinister, jet-black sword from its sheath at his waist.

“The other side seems ready to go. Let me take him on.” Alphonse grinned smugly, stepping forth to fight.

“…No. Surround and capture them. If he resists, I don’t mind if you counterattack, but…” The commanding officer chose to respond with only rationality. Since they knew about the knights and Flora, he wanted to talk to them a little more.

“?!”

Suddenly, Lucius broke into a run. His unbelievable speed left the knights wide-eyed in surprise.

“Brace…!” The commanding officer tried to give his order in a fluster. However, Lucius had snuck into the midst of the knights in an instant.

“Too slow! You should have strengthened yourselves with

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

magic the moment I drew my sword."

"Guh..." One of the knights went flying through the air, kicked away by Lucius. The knights around them looked upon that scene with their jaws dropped.

"A-Aaaah!" Alphonse roared in anger, charging straight to slash Lucius. His mouth was turned upwards in a savage smile, the opportunity perfect for him to expend his stress.

"Hahaha, you sure are an interesting one." Lucius blocked Alphonse's sword and laughed heartily.

"Die! *Augendae Corporis*!" Alphonse used physical ability enchanting magic as he put more strength into his sword. The spell circle appeared just a moment later, making strength swell within him and helping him push his sword forward with force. However, Lucius took a graceful step backwards and retreated.

"I'll leave you until last. Come on now, how about you lot activate your enhancement magic too?" Lucius said to Alphonse, before provoking the other knights into action.

"Kuh, *Augendae Corporis*!" The knights, in anger, each enhanced their physical abilities with magic one by one.

"Fine, kill that one! Just leave the hooded man instead!" the commanding knight said, having finally considered Lucius' killing intent.

"Yeah, give it your best shot!" Lucius shouted, jumping into the group of knights himself. Of course, the knights swung their swords to slay Lucius. However, Lucius slipped through the swinging slashing swords, enjoying the thrill.

"What's the matter, huh?! Is this all you can do?! Entertain me more!"

"D-Damn it!"

The knights felt like they were hallucinating, cutting through nothing but fog. No matter how many times they swung their swords, despite being certain they would make contact, their blades could not reach Lucius.

Lucius swung his sword, pulling it back at the last

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

moment before it could kill any of the knights. Occasionally, when the knights thought he was attacking, he would just deflect their attacks and do nothing else.

This guy's toying with us! the knights concluded as Lucius laughed cheerfully at them. There was no doubt Lucius was insane, genuinely enjoying this situation of slipping through the flashes of swords.

Time passed like that until Lucius spoke up, his tone full of boredom. "Ah… Guess it's time to lower the numbers." The end of his sword drove into the solar plexus of a knight, making him groan in agony.

"Guh!"

"Now it's my turn to attack," Lucius laughed brightly and began his counterattack.

"Gah!"

"Hah…"

He struck two knights with his fist and foot, making them collapse on the ground. No sooner had he done that, the next knight was being blown back by Lucius, flying through the air in a dramatic fashion. It was as though Lucius could read the movements of the knights completely, aiming for their weak points, moving before they could respond, and reaping them of their consciousness one by one with his blows.

"N-No way…" Alphonse watched his colleagues get taken down helplessly and found himself frozen in shock, before he suddenly returned to his senses and looked around. Their overwhelmingly advantageous situation had been flipped in an instant. Even at this moment, the number of knights that were safe was dwindling.

At that moment, Alphonse felt their defeat at hand — at this rate, they would lose. As he came to that realization, another knight, then another, fell to the ground.

"Wow, it sure is easier to move around when the numbers have decreased. I can go even faster now!" Lucius moved even faster than before, with no rhyme or reason to his

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

actions. His speed was faster than that of the knights that had enhanced their physical abilities with magic.

That movement... An enchanted sword! Alphonse thought, inferring the reason as to why Lucius' physical abilities were far beyond the norm. There was only one way he could have moved faster than their magically-enhanced selves.

Enchanted swords this, enchanted swords that! It's unfair! If I had one too, I could've...! As someone without one, Alphonse felt deep envy, as unproductive and meaningless an emotion as it was to have at the moment. The likelihood of him escaping was growing smaller by the minute.

"Guh!" Struck by a knee blow, another knight fell to the ground.

"Ah, four more left," Lucius said, looking over the cleared view of the road. Over twenty experienced knights had been reduced to four in less than a minute.

I-Impossible... Alphonse thought in a daze. When he looked around, the only people who were still conscious and on their feet were the four knights — including him and the commanding officer — as well as Lucius and Reiss.

"Thanks to you, I've made much progress in retrieving the unconscious knights," Reiss was observing Lucius and the knights from a small distance away, having gathered all the knights Lucius defeated without anyone's realization. They were all out cold.

"One last job left, it seems. It'll be your turn soon too, yeah?" Lucius said, looking at Alphonse, who had completely lost the will to fight.

"Eek..." Alphonse backed away reflexively in fear. No, it wasn't only Alphonse; the other remaining knights had lost their will to fight as well, inching backwards away from Lucius.

"R-Run! Retreat!" the still unharmed commanding officer

yelled. Immediately, the four knights — including Alphonse — broke into a run down the road.

I-It's for help! I need to call for help! This is just a strategic retreat! Alphonse told himself as he desperately ran. There was no trace of the enthusiastic spirit he had when he wanted to take down a minotaur to clear his name.

"Did none of you see our difference in physical abilities when I was fighting? Hey! Even if you run, I'll just catch up to you!" Lucius said in a voice filled with scorn before kicking off from the ground and chasing the knights. The distance between them closed in an instant, but the desperate knights didn't realize it.

"Hah, hah…!" Alphonse panted, focusing solely on moving his feet. Eventually, a sword reached out from behind him, passing a hair's breadth away from his cheek.

"E-Eeeh?! Wah!" Unable to press on any further, Alphonse stepped to the side and haphazardly swung his sword at Lucius, but his sword slashed through the air in vain. "Wha?!"

Alphonse's eyes widened in shock. Lucius was standing ten meters behind Alphonse, a wicked grin on his face. He watched Alphonse as he kicked the commanding officer.

I-Impossible! His sword was right there! Did he fall back to that position in an instant?! Alphonse's eyes widened in astonishment as he touched his cheek where the cold sensation of a sword had touched his skin moments earlier.

"You're the last, as promised. Don't give me too much trouble," Lucius quipped tiredly.

"G-Guh…" Unable to say anything in return, Alphonse backed away slowly. He glared at Lucius with deep hatred, as though he was looking upon something that spooked him.

"…You really do have quite the look in your eyes." Lucius stared back into Alphonse's eyes and swiftly walked over to close the distance between them. Alphonse shrunk back, unable to move.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“W-What?” There was nowhere to run anymore. Even as Alphonse replied to Lucius, he was groping for a path of survival.

“It’s those eyes of yours that show sly cunning. You may or may not be the one,” Lucius grinned, his words full of meaning.

“H-Huh?” Alphonse mumbled, having no idea what he meant.

“Well. In any case, I’ve become bored. Let’s end this, shall we?”

When Lucius closed the distance further, Alphonse yelled out in a fluster. “W-Wait! If it’s money you want, I’ll pay you. I’ll even stay quiet about you guys!”

“Ah? Money?” Alphonse seemed to pique Lucius’ interest, as he stopped moving forward and grinned in delight.

A-All right! It looks like I can negotiate with money! Seeing the space for negotiation made Alphonse grin in response.

“...You really are an interesting guy,” Lucius huffed through his nose, approaching Alphonse once more.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, at the governor of Amande’s estate, Rio had just finished his meal with Liselotte and was about to leave. Liselotte and the others had come to the garden to say goodbye.

“It’s an honor to be seen off by everyone. Thank you very much for everything today.” Rio drew his right hand over his chest and bowed his head at those present in respect.

“Thank you for coming over today. I’ll send a messenger on another day in the future, so it would be lovely if you could stay in Amande a little longer. Of course, if you need anything, you are free to visit my estate at any time,” Liselotte offered respectfully.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Rio gave a friendly smile as he nodded. “Yes, I appreciate your offer.” Unexpected events had happened one after another, but all’s well that ends well, after all. Thanks to everything, he had been able to form a close friendship with Liselotte.

For the record, defeating the minotaurs to save Liselotte and Flora was considered such a meritorious deed, they had yet to decide what to reward Rio with, requiring more time to examine the case. It was decided that he would visit Liselotte’s mansion again in the future about the matter. In other words, they would continue to be friends from here on out. Both Rio and Liselotte had the same intentions of forming a friendship, but neither of them had a grasp of their distance yet, so they were slowly building a relationship of trust without rushing. It was a bit roundabout, but this was normal for noble negotiations.

“U-Umm…!” Flora took a step forward nervously, calling out to Rio.

“Yes?” Rio replied, tilting his head.

“Umm. If we have the chance to meet again, please feel free to chat with me some more. We also want to give you our gratitude formally, so, please,” Flora said, bowing her head at Rio hesitantly.

“…Yes, it’d be my pleasure.” Rio paused for a moment before nodding with a smile.

Has she noticed something about me after all? Or is this just how she is?

He had suspicions. Flora seemed to be acting strangely, as though she was vaguely trying to meet him halfway. If there was a reason for Flora to be investigating Rio, then the most natural line of reasoning would be because she suspected Haruto was actually Rio. However, as far as he had seen from Flora’s actions until now, he couldn’t say for certain that she doubted him. At the very least, he couldn’t detect any negative feelings, and there was certainly the possibility

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

of this being how Flora would normally interact with him.

Rio had no points of contact with Flora during his time at the academy, so he didn't actually know what her personality was. All he knew was that she didn't seem to be a very extroverted person.

I guess I'll just see how things go for now.

He couldn't afford to seem too cautious in front of her. It would be best to remain as natural as possible, in order to play innocent, being that there was no proof that he was Rio.

Hiroaki, who had been watching the exchange between Rio and Flora fixedly, spoke up. "Well, we'll be staying in Amande until the safety of the area is confirmed, too. If you visit Liselotte's estate, there should be an opportunity to meet again," he said with a shrug.

"Yes — it's as the hero says. Oh, that's right! Sir Haruto prepares tea very well. I had some today by chance, but I could prepare a tea party for us sometime, if you are willing?" Liselotte said.

Rio nodded courteously. "Yes. I would be happy to attend if you wish to invite me."

"Y-Yes, I would also love to," Flora agreed nervously.

"Then let's leave this tea party for another date and wrap this up. Don't drag this out any longer and let him go home already," Hiroaki said bluntly.

"You're right — We shouldn't keep him any longer. Sir Haruto. Let us meet again," Duke Huguenot said.

"Yes. Everyone, let us meet another day. Please excuse me." Rio bowed his head deeply before turning on his heel and walking off. He continued walking to the gate while Liselotte watched his back.

Time to go back to the inn and relax. Freed from acting social with the nobles, Rio let out a small sigh.

◇ ◇ ◇

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Back in the forest to the west of Amande. *Rustle, rustle.*

Alphonse was vaguely aware that he was being dragged somewhere, that someone had a hold of him by the scruff of his neck. However, he had no idea what was happening. Looking back on his memories, he remembered he had been scouring the forest as part of an investigation.

Ah, shit… Belatedly, he recalled the numerous humiliations he faced afterwards. A surge of anger went through him; he couldn't forgive anyone who humiliated him.

However… *rustle, rustle.*

Someone was yanking Alphonse along, making him quite uncomfortable.

Who is it, treating me so roughly? Ugh… Alphonse found it most unpleasant, but a dull pain in the back of his head made him frown.

My head hurts.

Did he hit it hard somewhere? He didn't know.

"Yo, I'm done," a man's voice echoed happily. Immediately after, Alphonse felt the sensation of soaring through the air, before falling to the ground with a heavy thump.

"Ugh…" It seemed he had been thrown. Alphonse groaned.

"Good work. There were so many of them so I've already started," a vacant male voice echoed.

At that point, Alphonse's mind finally snapped to, and he opened his eyes faintly. He noticed they were inside the forest, having left the road.

This is… Alphonse finally remembered the identities of the men beside him. The ones that had attacked them. Lucius and Reiss.

Reiss was crouched on the ground, working away at something. Beside him stood Lucius.

"They sure are a creepy bunch, as always," Lucius said,

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

looking to the side. Contrary to his words, a delighted smile was on his face. Alphonse followed Lucius' gaze.

"Wha…" The scene that met Alphonse's eyes was so shocking, his body trembled. He could feel his mind reeling instantly.

T-Those are the humanoid monsters that attacked us on the road yesterday! Why are they wearing the elite knights' uniforms?!

Dark-skinned revenants wearing the same knight uniform as Alphonse stood around in swarms. All the revenants were hairless, their facial structures lacking individuality. However, there was no sign of the savagery witnessed in the ones from yesterday, all of them staring into space with vacant eyes.

What's the meaning of this?! Alphonse's mind couldn't keep up.

"Oh, it looks like someone's awake." Reiss looked at Alphonse with a truly wicked smile.

"Tch…!" Alphonse trembled with a flinch.

"I held back a little on this one. Here, have a look." Lucius chuckled with a grin, grabbing Alphonse's head and lifting it up. His gaze was led to where Reiss was crouched and beyond.

"Ugh…?!"

Alphonse's fellow knight was lying there; seeing him made Alphonse's face twist. There was something wrong with him.

"Ah, ah!" The knight was giving small, soundless screams as his body gave abrupt, twitching jerks. Reiss was holding down the knight from above, his mouth curved into a creepy grin.

"Oh my, is this too much for you to witness? He's just about to transform."

As he did so, the knight's body shook violently.

"W-What did you do?! What is that?!" Alphonse asked in agitation. The person who had once been Alphonse's

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

colleague was, at that moment, rapidly transforming into a non-human lifeform.

All the hair fell out of his body, his skin darkening in color, audibly hardening in texture. Though it was wearing his knight uniform, it was undoubtedly a revenant. There were absolutely no traces of his former form left. If Alphonse hadn't known who it used to be before, he wouldn't have been able to identify it.

"Remodeling the human body. A recreation of the soul and flesh. However, to remodel while they're still conscious makes them struggle tremendously, so it's more effective to recreate them while they're knocked out," Reiss answered in a somewhat cheerful voice.

"...Uh, hnngh!" The evil was too much for Alphonse to bear, making him feel nauseous.

Reiss, meanwhile, ignored Alphonse. "Ah, Lucius, could you please strip them of their clothes? We don't want to leave any evidence that the original bodies of the revenants were humans."

"No way, I have no interest in stripping dudes of their clothes. Do it yourself later."

Reiss shook his head in disapproval. "Good grief."

"Nngah... hah..." Alphonse was coughing violently, gasping for breath.

Reiss watched him. "So, why is he still conscious?"

"Test it out on him — your final form of the revenants. I reckon he has the qualities for it," Lucius answered with a grin.

"It'd be a waste of a body and materials if it fails, though. Body aside, the gems used as materials are valuable, you realize? The chances of succeeding at the final form are low as well."

"Just this one time is fine, isn't it? You're gonna make the rest of the guys here into the enhanced model, no? If you add all the pieces in your hand together, its plenty of power

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

to attack Amande with.”

“…I suppose that’s true.” Reiss stood up with a small sigh. Leaving the newly-completed revenant behind him, he approached Alphonse.

“There we go.” With a carefree word of encouragement, Lucius pinned Alphonse’s arms behind his back and made him stand up.

“L-Let go! Don’t come any closer! Stop! You monster!” Alphonse struggled as he yelled, eyes never leaving the monster that was his former colleague. However, he was unable to break free from Lucius’ abnormal strength.

“Let’s have a look.” Reiss stood before Alphonse. At some point, he picked up an eerie jewel-like stone in his hand, its size the same as a fist.

“Guh?!” The stone was thrust into Alphonse’s chest like piercing through water, and he couldn’t hold back his groan. Yet despite the strange, foreign sensation, there was no pain.

“It doesn’t hurt, right? That’s because I’m not harming your physical body,” Reiss explained cheerfully, his hand in Alphonse’s chest. He leaned in to whisper into Alphonse’s ear. “Both your body and soul will start to hurt from here.”

“Guh… hah…” Alphonse gasped in agony. His heart was hot, his body was hot, and it felt like he was going to melt. He was hit with the urge to spit out everything inside his body, but he wasn’t able to.

“This will take some time.” They were crueler than the verdict of a demon declaring death.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Chapter 6: Their Respective Nights

Just past evening that same day, in a guest room of Liselotte's mansion in Amande. Duke Huguenot had finished his dinner and was listening to the captain of the elite guard, Raymond Brandt, give his report.

"...The investigation squad didn't return?" Duke Huguenot asked with a furrowed brow.

"Yes, I believe something unforeseen must have happened," Raymond reported with a pale face.

"Something unforeseen? Did we not discuss forming an advance squad with our knights with a focus on fighting ability and mobility in order to deal with that?" Duke Huguenot asked detachedly.

"It would mean that the dispatched squad encountered a difficulty not even they could deal with."

"Do you mean to say a higher number of monsters were lurking than expected?"

"It is also possible that they simply had an accident..." Raymond said with difficulty. While the probability wasn't zero, they were still knights that had undergone training. There was nothing more shameful than to have run into such trouble in the forest beside the city.

"...Very well. You may leave. I will send a directive shortly," Duke Huguenot ordered, sighing deeply.

"Understood." Raymond nodded with a stiff voice, then turned around. After a moment, the door swung shut.

"It seems we really are lacking soldiers with military capability. That squad should have included Alphonse, too...

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

So he really was incompetent.”

Duke Huguenot’s irritated voice echoed through the empty room.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Liselotte’s mansion, Hiroaki was having after-dinner tea with Flora and Roanna in a guest living room separate to the guest bedrooms.

“…” The usually talkative Hiroaki was drinking tea silently for some reason. Flora also seemed a little dazed, but she was never very chatty to begin with.

It’s quiet… Roanna quietly watched Hiroaki’s face, observing his vastly different behavior.

“…Hah.” With his teacup in hand, Hiroaki let out a long-suffering sigh. He seemed to be clearly exhibiting the signs of worrying about something. However, Flora remained in her dazed state, unresponsive to how oddly Hiroaki was behaving.

Princess Flora also seems listless. I wonder what’s gotten into her and Sir Hiroaki…

Roanna was unable to stand the strange air in the room any longer. “Umm, Sir Hiroaki, is something the matter?” she asked nervously.

“Hm? What?” Hiroaki replied in a rather curt voice. Roanna mustered her courage to speak up.

“Umm, you don’t seem to be very happy. If there’s anything bothering you…”

At that, even Flora finally noticed their conversation, turning her ear towards them.

“Nah, it’s not that anything’s the matter…” Hiroaki said, shaking his head exaggeratedly. Contrary to his words, his attitude clearly showed something was wrong, so Roanna quietly waited for him to continue speaking.

“Don’t you think Flora is acting weirder than me?”

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Hiroaki suddenly said, turning to Flora.

"...Huh?" Taken aback, Flora's body shook.

Hiroaki watched her silently. "..."

"Ah, umm, did I do something strange?" Flora cocked her head in confusion.

"Hmm. So you're not aware of it. Ever since we were attacked by the monsters, you've been restless, like your heart isn't really in it," Hiroaki said with slight displeasure. Roanna made a face of realization as something sprung to mind.

"I-I don't believe that's true..." Flora shook her head with a frown.

"Well, if that's what you insist, then fine. It just seemed like that was the case to me, but what you say is probably right," Hiroaki said sharply. The way he phrased it was enough for Flora to feel the need to confirm.

"U-Umm, what did I look like to you?"

"Hmm. Well, as an example, you seem to be rather interested in that man. You were always watching his face, you know?" Hiroaki said, watching Flora's reaction with a sidelong glance.

"Ah, umm, by that man, you mean... Umm. Do you mean Sir Haruto?" she said hesitantly.

"Yeah. So you're aware that the man I'm talking about is Haruto," Hiraki said in an ill-tempered tone.

"Huh? No... Umm, that's..."

Flora had no idea why Hiroaki would say such a thing. Being that she was raised as a princess, she was hardly pressed by others as it concerned her speech or actions; when combined with her natural disposition, she had no idea how to deal with it.

"Princess Flora represents all of us, so she is probably troubled by how to properly express gratitude towards him for saving us from our predicament. There's also the fact Duke Huguenot seems to be trying to scout him," Roanna

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

said immediately, supporting Flora.

"Hmm, I see. Is that true?" Hiroaki asked somewhat dubiously.

"Y-Yes," Flora said, nodding awkwardly.

"Well, I suppose I can understand that much. But still, that Haruto… Don't you think you're all acting a little too excited about him?" Hiroaki said with skepticism.

"That's because you are so powerful. When your own position is so far above, it makes those surrounding you appear lower. For us regular people, he seems plenty amazing." Roanna explained, complimenting Hiroaki in the same breath. If it were Flora, she probably wouldn't have been able to make something up on the spot as cleverly.

"Ah, I see… So that's how it is. Well, in that case, I guess it can't be helped." Hiroaki's pride was pleased to receive the praise, making him smirk.

For Roanna's sake I'll quietly accept that for today, he thought. However, he was still disappointed in Flora.

Honestly, I can always count on Roanna to have a lively conversation. Flora's cute, but there's nothing beyond that.

Hiroaki spent time with Flora and Roanna on a daily basis, so he already knew what their personalities were like. Flora could be summarized in one word: shy. To put it nicely, she was reserved… but if one chose to be harsh, you could say she was gloomy. She didn't seem to be used to socializing with men, so she barely spoke when she was in the presence of the opposite gender. Even when she was with Hiroaki, who she knew fairly well by now, there were awkward silences at times.

At the very least, she wasn't the type of girl to aggressively pursue men. The fact that she assertively tried to talk to Haruto, despite that, didn't sit right. He couldn't help but feel unsatisfied that she was acting proactive towards the wrong person. He was thinking selfishly.

Hiroaki didn't seem to be aware of it himself, but contrary

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

to his aspirations, he didn't have the guts to go about forming human relations all that well by himself. That's what made him both easy and difficult to handle at the same time.

He was a spoiled and troublesome man.

◇ ◇ ◇

Flora bid farewell to Hiroaki and Roanna once the conversation died down and returned to the guest bedroom she had been allocated. Liselotte's attendants helped her prepare a bath and change of clothes, leaving her to flop onto the bed afterwards.

...Was I really that strange today?

She was bothered by what Hiroaki had pointed out earlier; he had said she was showing too much interest in Haruto, and seemed rather unhappy about it.

However, it was an undeniable fact that she was interested in Haruto.

Rio. Haruto. Their names are different. Their hair colors are different. He had acquaintances that he had been with for a long time. That's why he should be a different person, and yet...

She couldn't help but overlap the sight of Haruto fighting the minotaur from behind and of Rio, who had fought the minotaur during the academy's outdoor drill in order to save Flora.

It was why she couldn't help but stare at Haruto all day today. If the others around her found it strange, then it was possible that Haruto thought the same.

Ugh, I'm so hopeless...

Flora felt a strong sense of self-hatred. Her head was spinning, unable to keep up with her thoughts, but she continued to question herself.

What do I even want to do about it, anyway? If Sir

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Haruto really is Rio, what would I do?

She couldn't possibly confirm it by asking him, but even if Haruto really was Rio, she doubted he would tell her the truth. After all, the Kingdom of Beltrum had once pushed a false accusation on Rio, then returned his favor with enmity instead. There was no taking back that sin.

Do I apologize? What we did was something unforgivable, though…

Did she really want him to forgive her? If so, it seemed far too convenient for her.

"Nn…" Once she reached that conclusion, she hated herself even more than she had earlier. Her face twisted with tears.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

◇ ◇ ◇

A short while ago, in a drawing room of Liselotte's mansion…

"…And that's what happened. At present, the status of our knights is unknown, but it would be appropriate to assume that they have run into some kind of trouble," Duke Huguenot explained. He'd requested an emergency audience with Liselotte to report how the dispatched knights had yet to return.

"…I am sorry. I should have sent out personnel from my side too," Liselotte apologized with a shamed expression.

"No, I was the one who requested that the advance squad be formed from our knights. It's hard to believe that a squad of twenty knights lacked the combat power for an initial investigation. If anything, one would normally consider it overkill." Duke Huguenot shook his head with a bitter smile. Without an escort target to protect getting in the way, twenty knights was enough to take down a minotaur. He had sent them with that in mind. If that hadn't been enough, then this could no longer be called anything but bad luck.

"Even so…" Liselotte started to say something mournfully. However, Duke Huguenot lifted a hand to stop her.

"It's not confirmed that they were entirely wiped out, though I suppose it is hard to imagine that they've simply become lost wandering the forest. However, we should be considering what to do next. Do I have that right?" Duke Huguenot stated calmly.

"…Yes. However, in the event that the worst has happened, I will provide the maximum compensation," Liselotte said in a resolute voice after taking in a deep breath.

"I apologize for being even more of a burden, but this is not an issue that should go unaddressed. We will do our best

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

to resolve the situation. Let's pull ourselves together."

"...I appreciate that. As much as I want to send a follow-up squad right away, if an unforeseen situation has happened to as many as twenty knights, I must be careful in selecting personnel."

It was no exaggeration to say that the title of a knight was proof that a human had obtained military ability of the highest degree. Certain powerful, leading figures who could use enchanted swords and run through the battlefield displaying their superhuman prowess by temporarily enhancing their physical abilities with magic or sorcery were merely exceptions.

Of course, knights had differences in individual strength and squads had differences in experience, but there was no overlooking a formation of twenty knights being caught off guard.

Thus, the squad to be sent next needed to be selected with more military power, either by increasing the overall quantity or raising the individual quality.

If it's come to this, I'll have to send Aria, Liselotte thought.

Aria was the strongest subordinate she had. She normally kept Aria beside her as a guard, but she'd have to mobilize her in this situation.

"If you do send one, make it after daybreak. At earliest, after the sun rises. There's still the possibility they'll suddenly make their way back in the morning. I would say noon would be latest to reach a conclusion, do you agree?" Duke Huguenot said with a contemplative look. While it was a little slow-paced, it would be reckless to enter the forest at night. If the search party ran into trouble, their efforts would be meaningless.

"Yes," Liselotte nodded immediately, having thought exactly the same.

"However, I do believe most of the monsters were cleaned

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

up in the earlier battle.”

“...There were some monsters that fled back into the forest, but I don’t really want to consider that possibility. You mean to imply that there might be minotaurs left behind — is that correct?” Duke Huguenot and Liselotte frowned together.

As an estimate, there were roughly several hundred monsters that attacked them earlier — a number no normal city would have in their vicinity even if they were all rounded up. On top of that, minotaurs weren’t commonly spotted monsters to begin with. For several of them to be lurking about made the situation far too irregular.

“Perhaps. If I were to assume the worst case scenario, there could be more monsters than what appeared earlier still lurking. Although it’s not something I want to believe,” Duke Huguenot said bitterly. If that assumption were true, it would mean over a thousand monsters were hidden in the area surrounding Amande.

Liselotte also nodded bitterly. “Agreed.” *If that many monsters were completely overlooked in the vicinity of the city, then it’s even stranger. But such preconceptions are what led us to the current situation anyway.* She scolded her own naivety.

“I intend to send Aria out for this. I will also select several proficient attendants and soldiers and lend them enchanted swords.” She normally only allowed Aria to carry an enchanted sword, but she was going all-out this time.

“Understood. I would like nothing more than to offer some of my knights, but...”

“No, there is no need to mobilize any more of your knights for us. The next party shall be formed by my forces,” Liselotte said in an orderly manner. With twenty knights missing in the current situation, she couldn’t allow him to move any more of his personnel.

Duke Huguenot nodded heavily and brought up Haruto,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

who would be most reliable after his great earlier performance. “I understand. Then may I suggest that you inquire if Haruto would be willing to lend his assistance?”

“...It would be one thing to rely on an adventurer of Amande, but Sir Haruto is merely a commoner. Not to mention there are also women in his company...” Liselotte shook her head respectfully.

“True, one would normally turn to adventurers for cases like this.”

“Yes. But I will not be using adventurers this time. With such a high possibility of minotaurs still around, it’s possible the monsters might follow some kind of leadership like they did during the road attack. Preparations should be made in case Amande is attacked while short-handed.”

The biology of monsters wasn’t well understood, but it was known that they swarmed around powerful individuals and moved under their leadership towards a target. The monsters that had attacked them on the road were clearly following some kind of leadership, so it was most likely that a minotaur or humanoid monster had been leading the horde.

And if there really were minotaurs remaining, it was highly likely they would make planned movements, at worst placing the city in danger of attack. There were rarely any adventurers with skill on par with knights, but they were many in number. If the monsters attacked in droves, they would be a reliable source of combat power.

“That is a most justified decision,” Duke Huguenot said, nodding worriedly.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, in the depths of the forest west of Amande, Lucius and Reiss were seated around a campfire. Surrounding them were countless dark-skinned revenants,

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

standing silently. It made an extremely eerie sight.

"The bodies recreated towards the end should be completely settled soon." Reiss chuckled in satisfaction as he looked around at the revenants.

"Good to hear... But the way they swarm around pisses me off. Put them away already," Lucius demanded uneasily.

"Oh? I would have liked to keep my new collection up for a little longer to gaze upon them."

"Hah, you really are a creepier bastard than I am."

Reiss grinned. "Why, that's because they're basically my children. But if you insist, then I suppose I have no choice," he said, breathing a small sigh. The revenants standing around them immediately began to sink into the earth.

"I can finally breathe again. Now I can have a good night's rest, at least," Lucius huffed through his nose in satisfaction.

"The plan will be set in motion tomorrow morning, before the sun rises. Make sure you don't sleep in."

"Hey, hey. Who do you think you're talking to?"

"I suppose you would never sleep in before a fight, hmm?" Reiss said with a chuckle.

"If you're going to worry about sleeping in, worry about our Alphonse, our newest member, over there. Right? Hey," Lucius bantered lightly, looking over at the third person sitting by the fire to warm up. There sat a revenant with jet black skin far darker than the dark grey skin of the other revenants, silently watching on.

"...Hmph. In that case. You. Should have let me. Go to Amande alone. And clean up. Everything. Before the other defectives. Settle in." The jet black revenant named Alphonse huffed unhappily through his nose before boasting in a terribly ghastly voice.

"Hahaha, what a revolting voice," Lucius said lightly, mouth turned in a carefree grin.

"This is the final form of the revenant. While it is notably more powerful and aggressive than the enhanced version,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

it’s all intellect and no reason, making it difficult to handle,” Reiss muttered tiredly.

“But he’ll be of use in tomorrow’s attack, no?” Lucius asked, his mouth in a relaxed grin.

Reiss nodded in exasperation. “Well, yes.”

As a disposable pawn, anyway. His mouth twisted faintly in a repulsive smile.

“Well, that’s what it’s gonna be. We have high expectations of you, Alphonse,” Lucius said brightly, his smile completely hollow.

The jet black revenant nodded, his reply disjointed. “Yeah. I’ll kill them. All. Of them.” Nothing but hatred swirled within those eyes that had lost all sense of reason.

“Haha. How hopeless.”

Lucius’ disgusted laugh echoed throughout the quiet forest.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Chapter 7: Another Attack

The next morning, at a time before the sun had risen and the sky was dyed a lapis blue, when the earth was just starting to illuminate with the coming dawn, Aishia visited Rio's bedroom to try and wake up him.

"Haruto, wake up."

"...Aishia? Good morning." Rio immediately opened his eyes, but his expression was still half asleep as he replied.

"Good morning. It's an emergency," Aishia said in a flat voice.

"What happened?" Rio asked with a serious look.

"Monsters suddenly appeared."

"...Inside or outside the city?"

"Don't know their exact position. But they're to the west. Their presence is jumbled up, so there's probably a lot of them. I should have noticed a presence this strong much earlier, but I couldn't tell," Aishia said in a rare display of worry.

"...I understand." Rio got out of bed and patted Aishia on the shoulder. "For now, let's get a clearer understanding of the situation. Where's the professor?" he asked in a calm voice.

"Still sleeping." Aishia stared at Rio's face as she replied. Immediately after, the emergency bells of the city started ringing, echoing from the city's gate.

A beat later, the familiar sound of a monster's roar resonated loudly through the air.

"MROOOOOOOH!"

◇ ◇ ◇

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Earlier that day, at the lookout post of Amande's western gate...

"Aaaah..." a soldier yawned loudly.

"It's still too early for the next shift to arrive. Pull yourself together — we're on high alert right now," his superior, who was on guard with him, scolded him in a harsher voice than usual.

Presently, Amande had strengthened its guard due to certain unforeseen circumstances, making shifts more frequent and increasing the number of soldiers at the east and west gates. A large number of soldiers had been assigned in particular to the west gate, which was where the huge number of monsters had spawned in the forest.

Incidentally, the northern section of Amande was a lake — their main water source — so there was no entrance there. Furthermore, the formerly small city of Amande had rapidly developed into this large city in the last few years, and they were still in the middle of clearing forests for more expansion. With the expansion of the city came allocating the metro areas, so the farmlands that had once been scattered between the east and west were now allocated to the cleared lands to the south.

The outermost walls of the city were not made of stone like castle walls, but logs that could be moved every time expansion occurred.

"Yes sir." The soldier who yawned pulled himself together and nodded. He must have felt pride for his job in protecting Amande, as his face was quite serious.

Suddenly, another soldier on the lookout spotted a figure in the distance. "Hey! Is there someone on the road?!"

"A person? At this hour?" The superior rubbed his eyes in doubt.

"There's a lot of them. How many people is that?" Another soldier next to them spoke up quickly. The gate was lit by fire torches, but the surroundings were still dim and their

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

visions were obscured by the fog. It was unthinkable to be walking along the forest road at this hour to begin with; though there was a path, the forests were pitch black at night. On top of being unable to perceive even the shortest distance, there was also the danger of roaming nocturnal beasts. Even the city's gates were firmly shut until morning came.

"Come to think of it, we received a message that the foreign knights that went to investigate the forest might return. Oh, but the message warned that unidentified monsters could also appear..." the superior recalled with a dubious face. In that time, the figures gradually drew nearer.

"Uuuh..." Dozens of revenants appeared with an eerie groan. There were gray-skinned ones scattered between darker gray ones, but it was hard to tell them apart in the dim lighting.

From their hairless heads, expressions of sinister madness, and completely naked bodies, it was clear they were not human.

"I-It's the unidentified monsters! Sound the alarm!" The superior ordered a nearby soldier in shock.

"Y-Yes sir!" The ordered soldier replied in a fluster, ringing the bells of the lookout post at a fixed rhythm. The sound of the bells echoed loudly through the quiet city.

"Geehehehe!" A large army of goblins and orcs leapt out of the forest all at once.

"We're stopping them here, everyone! Don't let them inside the gate!" the superior yelled with determination at the shoulders, obviously conscious of the worst-case scenario.

"Right!" The soldiers nodded firmly. However, a ferocious monster's roar echoed loudly from the back of the road.

"MROOOOOOOOOH!"

The soldiers trembled at the sound. "?!"

"D-Don't tell me..." A bad feeling came over the superior,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

making him grimace. He recalled the message and how it said there was one more type of monster other than the unidentified revenants.

They were called minotaurs — monsters that had rampaged with fury during the Divine War. One moment later, a *thump, thump, thump* shook the ground.

"I-It's coming!" the superior yelled.

"MROOH!" From the depths of the foggy road appeared the minotaur. The monsters packed on the road moved to the sides to allow it to pass.

"I-It's huge!" The lookout post the soldiers were standing on was ten meters above the ground, but the minotaur still looked huge when they looked down on it. It was easily four meters tall.

Suddenly, the minotaur took a running leap.

"Ah…!" The soldiers were momentarily at eye level with it, and their jaws dropped in shock. The minotaur swung its stone greatsword down with force.

"I-It's going to break the gate! Retreat!" The very moment the superior yelled aloud, the city gate was destroyed by the stone sword. The foundation was crushed into pieces, sending the lookout post on top crumbling to the ground.

"Tch. Prepare for impact! Combat begins as soon as we reach the ground!" The superior barely managed to yell.

"Gufufufu." The minotaur gazed upon the ruins of the gate it destroyed and let its mouth widen into a smile filled with dominance.

It looks like we've succeeded in obtaining an entry route without issue. All that's left is to spread the combat as far as possible and draw out their power. The east gate is next. Reiss was hidden among the monsters in the forest, quietly observing the minotaur and the surrounding situation. He sighed quietly, before gently floating into the air.

But the problem will be that humanoid spirit and its contractee. We'll have to adapt to their movements, but if

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

the spirit is materialized, it will be easy enough to locate. For now, we should take this chance to open the east gate. There shouldn't be as many soldiers placed over there, Reiss thought as he moved swiftly towards the east gate.

◇ ◇ ◇

Elsewhere, Rio took Aishia out of his bedroom and through the living room, continuing quickly towards the bedroom where Celia was sleeping… only to have Celia burst out of the room in a panic.

"Rio, Aishia, are you there?!" It seemed like the commotion outside had woken her up.

"Professor."

"Rio, Aishia — thank goodness…!" Celia sighed in relief, hugging Rio tightly. When she'd startled awake, the bed that Aishia was supposed to be sleeping in was empty. She'd probably been worried.

"It's all right. There's no need to worry," Rio said, gently hugging Celia.

"Y-Yeah…" Celia buried her face into Rio's chest, nodding hesitantly.

Once Rio confirmed that Celia had calmed down, he explained the circumstances. "It seems like a large number of monsters have spawned, either inside or outside the city. There are probably minotaurs too."

Celia stared at Rio's face. "…What will you do?" she asked nervously.

"Let's see…" Rio mumbled as he pondered to himself.

He was merely an outsider, and it was Liselotte's duty to protect the city of Amande. As this land was Liselotte's home base, she surely had enough military strength under her name, unlike when they were attacked on the road. While the minotaurs would be tough, it was possible to drive them away with a large number of people equal in strength to a

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

knight.

However, he couldn't take an optimistic approach without more information. If the number of monsters surpassed that of the city's defense, the worst-case scenario could surely occur.

It's not that I'm obligated to protect Amande, but I can't have Liselotte falling here… And I can't expose the professor to danger, either, Rio thought, organizing his motives and the situation at hand. If he was only thinking about fleeing, then he could just fly out of the city with spirit arts. It was undesirable to use spirit arts in front of others, but he could explain away his most often-used wind spirit arts as a product of his wind elemental enchanted sword.

However, it wouldn't look very good to Liselotte if she later found out that the first thing they did was flee to safety by themselves. Not to mention that if Amande was destroyed here, the favorable relationship he had been building with Liselotte would cease. If possible, Rio wanted to avoid that. Which meant —

I need more information first. My final decision can come after that.

Either way, rushing into action was both reckless and irresponsible. As long as it wasn't a life-threatening dilemma where it would be better to flee without a second thought, it was the perfect chance to further make Liselotte indebted to him.

"Hey, Rio. You don't have to worry about me. I know I'm the biggest hindrance out of us, but I can also fight a bit if I can use magic. That's why… umm. You should choose the action that's best for you." Celia sensed that Rio's expression was serious and spoke with hesitation. Her eyes showed a glimpse of her firm intention to follow Rio — no matter what.

"…Okay." Rio nodded with an indescribable feeling. "Then let's get changed first, so we can move around easily," he

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

suggested with his usual smile to reassure Celia.

◇ ◇ ◇

After Rio finished changing from his sleepwear into his black wyvern combat clothes, he headed to the inn's back garden alone. The inn employees and guests had noticed the commotion some time ago, but their attention was drawn to the entrance facing the square, so there was no one in the back garden. Rio took advantage of this and rose into the air, then looked down on the west side of the city from above. From the sky, the ground below looked rather dim.

The gate's been destroyed... There must be a lot of monsters.

Rio took note of the situation. The square at the western gate that would normally be overflowing with stalls and customers was currently surging with a stream of goblins and orcs. The minotaurs and revenants brought up the rear, but they were still observing from afar. On the other hand...

The city's reaction is also swift.

Soldiers and adventurers were already gathering at the entrance of the road leading to the west gate and assuming battle formations. They were forming an improvised defense line to prevent the monsters from invading further; it was possible that personnel had been placed at the west gate in advance as a precaution.

Further, the square near the gate was apparently designed with the intention of inviting external enemies in and blocking them off. As long as the road into the city was defended, the remaining buildings would act as a barricade preventing invasion. Even if a large number of monsters pushed past the mouth of the road, the width limitations meant the number of monsters within reach would decrease. Thankfully, it appeared as though they would be able to hold the fort. During that time, the residents along the road

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

would evacuate towards the center of the city.

Reinforcements are arriving one after another. It looks like this'll be... — Rio thought, determining the status of the west gate, when Aishia's telepathy echoed inside Rio's head.

Haruto, lots of monsters just spawned at the east gate.

East? Rio turned on the spot and looked to the east. There, swarms of monsters were appearing from the forest right before the east gate. The lookouts at the gate noticed the surprise attack and rang the bell in a hurry, but a new minotaur appeared, letting out a ferocious roar.

"MROOOOOH!"

It drowned out the sound of the warning bell, alerting the city of its own presence.

"MROGH!" The minotaur used its tremendous physical abilities to take a running leap, soaring over the heads of the goblins and orcs to arrive at the gate first. It then swung its stone greatsword down, smashing the gate into pieces.

"Guheehee!"

"Buhee! Buhee!"

Shortly after the attack from the minotaur, the goblins and orcs flowed past the creature, invading the city one after another.

...That's a lot. How many are there in total? Roughly estimating, Rio would guess the number of monsters to the east and west easily surpassed one thousand.

And they were still appearing from the forests. The situation was gradually becoming worse.

Haruto, what do we do? Aishia asked.

Rio didn't reply immediately, looking over the entire city instead. With the east and west gates breached, the only gate unharmed was to the south. The south gate faced wide, open farmlands, where there were still no signs of any monsters.

Meanwhile, the northern area where Liselotte's mansion was located faced a lake, so there was no gate there at all. The area was also surrounded by tall and sturdy ramparts,

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

able to be used as an evacuation area in an emergency. Judging by the movements of the citizens at the south, they were moving towards the north block.

For now, could you stay with the professor in the room and wait? It doesn't seem like the monsters will reach the middle of the city anytime soon, and all the citizens from the west are relocating to the center. It looks like they're evacuating to the north. Even if you went outside now, you wouldn't be able to move, Rio directed Aishia calmly as he looked down at the ground. The square before the inn they were staying in was already crammed with residents coming from the west. If the eastern citizens started moving here too, then it would be safer to stay inside the inn.

...What will you do, Haruto? Aishia asked Rio again.

The defensive forces at the east gate are thin. I'll go block them off. Presently, only a few lance-wielding soldiers were guarding the road facing the east gate square. Facing them were easily several hundred monsters, making them simply outnumbered.

They wouldn't even last a minute, which meant the monsters had a chance of reaching the inn where Aishia and Celia were. But he could still make it in time.

Be careful.

Thank you. I won't let the monsters reach you, but...

I know. Leave Celia to me, Aishia's determined voice echoed.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, at the mouth of the road facing Amande's east gate square, the soldiers protecting the area had completely lost their nerves.

"Eek! There's too many of them!"

Several meters away, the army of goblins and orcs closed in.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Fool! There are many citizens still evacuating behind us. For Lady Liselotte’s sake, too, protect this place with your life!” the supervisor in charge of the area yelled in motivation. They couldn’t afford to abandon their posts, as there were still huge crowds of residents evacuating behind them.

“That’s right! Let’s protect this spot with our lives! I’m alone, but I’m here as a reinforcement!” the youthful voice of a young girl yelled. It was Chloe. She had been the first one dispatched to check the situation on the east gate, where the defense was thinner, when the monsters suddenly attacked.

“L-Li’l Chloe!”

“Stop calling me that — I’m an adult!” Chloe replied with a bitter smile. She was a little conflicted about how people still called her “Li’l Chloe” and treated her like a child, having watched her grow up in Amande from a young age with her family’s inn.

“Sorry, Li’l Chloe. Having you here from the attendant team is most reassuring. We’re counting on you.”

“Geez, I already said…! No, there’s no time. I’ll use magic to intimidate the approaching monsters, so could everyone ready their lances and deal with the monsters that draw near?”

“L-Leave it to us!” the soldiers nodded, and the battle soon begun.

“*Photon Projectilis!*” Chloe held her hands out and chanted the spell. A magic circle immediately appeared, firing bullets of magic essence converted to energy bullets from within the circle.

“Gweh?!” The bullets of light blew the goblins away. It was a kind of magic that had enough force to knock out a human in a single blow, depending on where it landed — meaning a small-bodied goblin could easily be sent flying.

There’s so many of them! I hope the reinforcements come soon…

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Panic soon showed on Chloe's face; blowing away a handful of goblins wasn't about to stop the advancing army of monsters. They closed the distance from her without reserve, confidence clear in their creepy smiles.

"Guheehee!" The giant orc acted as a wall for the goblins, drawing within meters of them. Unlike the child-sized goblins, orcs had the height of an adult human and thick skin that wouldn't yield so easily to one shot of the photon bullet.

"..." Panicked, Chloe glanced behind her. There was no sign of the reinforcements, only the sight of the residents evacuating with only the clothes on their back.

The situation was hopeless. They wouldn't even be able to last minutes like this.

"Geeeehhk?!" Suddenly, a strong gale blew from the diagonally left to the side, and all of the monsters right before Chloe's eyes were easily blown away.

"Eh...?" Chloe found herself gazing in amazement. The other soldiers were also dumbfounded.

Just then, Rio landed lightly right in front of Chloe. "Allow me to assist you until your reinforcements arrive."

"H-Haruto?! Ah, no — I mean, Sir Haruto!" Chloe stammered immediately.

"Chloe." The attendant uniform she was wearing helped Rio immediately identify her.

"U-Umm, why are you here?" Chloe asked hesitantly.

"I figured the defense at the east gate would be thinner as it was attacked later, so I came as backup."

"T-Thank you very much!" Rio's simplistic answer filled Chloe with relief, and she thanked him from the bottom of her heart.

"Now, let's reduce the number of monsters as much as possible before the reinforcements arrive. May I take the frontline?" Rio asked as he braced his sword and faced the monsters, who seemed to be wary of Rio and had frozen in

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

place.

"Y-Yes, please do," Chloe nodded with a squeak.

"Then, if everyone here could handle the monsters that make it to the street." With those words, Rio calmly closed his distance with the monsters. Sending essence into the sword in his hand, he created a large gale of wind and fired it at the monsters.

"Guhee?!" Dozens of the monsters before him were pushed back to the gate, easily blown away. No sooner had he done that, Rio was charging into the group of monsters, initiating close-quarters-combat.

"J-Just what *is* that guy?" The soldiers muttered in a daze at the tremendous sight of Rio's combat prowess, frozen in their awe.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, at the governor's estate of Amande, Liselotte had set up a temporary command post in her garden to deal with the situation at hand.

"The citizens will be on edge from fear. Make sure their relocation into the inner city goes smoothly. And what was that new alarm and minotaur-like roar? I want more information," Liselotte said to her subordinates. The attendant, Natalie, rushed to give her report with a pained expression.

"There was a message from the watchtower through the magic transmission device. It seems as though a large number of monsters have appeared at the east gate, accompanied by a minotaur. They seem to have broken in." For the record, the watchtower was a tower built in the north district that oversaw all the areas of the city.

"W-What did you say?! How far have they gotten inside?" Liselotte asked for confirmation in a panic.

"We don't have any details at present, but they had

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

intercepted them at the square facing the east gate. But our people will be quite outnumbered, so I believe we must send reinforcements as soon as possible…”

“Even if we send the soldiers and adventurers in the rear guard, they’d be in danger of clashing with the citizens evacuating the other way. What about the attendants dispatched near the east gate?” All the attendants could either use magic or had magic artifacts with sorcery to enchant their physical abilities. If they were mobilized, they could move from one point to another quickly and smoothly.

“Most of the personnel have been dispatched to the west gate, so at present, it’s only Chloe. Cosette and the others should be in the center, assisting with the relocation of evacuating citizens…”

“Then I want you to head there right away. You can bring Cosette along with you when you pass her.”

Natalie nodded after a faint pause. “…Understood.” She hesitated was because the number of Liselotte’s own guards would be lowered without her.

Most of the other attendants besides Natalie were out right now, so there were barely any skilled fighters left. While there were still some attendants left, many of them were ill-suited in terms of fighting, making Natalie the most combat-experienced attendant remaining. However, the current situation required all skilled fighters out on the field, even if that left the mansion less guarded. Otherwise the threat of the front lines being broken through became more likely.

If the attack is as large as the one at the west gate, we’ll be lacking power even with me there. Cosette might not even be able to fill that gap… Natalie’s heart was torn.

“Duke Huguenot’s knights will stay here at the mansion, so you don’t need to worry about my protection. This should be the safest place in the city anyway, right? All you need to do is focus on your own mission. Now go on. Get out of

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

here.” Liselotte seemed to see through Natalie’s woes and urged her to depart with haste.

“…Understood. Then… *Augendae Corporis*.” Natalie chanted the spell to enhance her physical abilities and ran off at full speed, leaving the estate. Not long after that, another attendant named Grace appeared.

“Lady Liselotte, a report.” Grace could fight too, but was remaining at the mansion for her rare healing magic.

“Go on.”

“A skilled swordsman appeared at the east gate square. He’s driving back the monsters alone.”

“…Sir Haruto?”

“Most likely.” Liselotte frowned apologetically. “…It seems like I owe him once again… But that’s a relief. Natalie’s on her way too, so the east gate should have enough manpower now,” she uttered, relieved at the appearance of reinforcements.

◇ ◇ ◇

Inside the ramparts of Amande’s north area in an isolated back alley…

“Hahaha, to think it’d be so easy to sneak in. What a piece of cake,” Lucius said lightly. After sneaking into the north district amongst the evacuating residents, Lucius and Reiss had come here.

“Please refrain from speaking,” Reiss sighed tiredly.

“Don’t be so boring. I’ve already had to step away from such a fun-looking battlefield. You could at least keep me company in conversation.”

“Then let’s talk business. As soon as the minotaurs give the next signal, we’ll begin to move. Please be prepared to move at a moment’s notice.”

“Gotcha.” Lucius’ mouth twisted in a grin.

Now, the humanoid spirit’s aura has remained at the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

center of the city this entire time. And it's about time for the back line to join the front lines… Reiss turned in the direction of the center block and narrowed his eyes.

◇ ◇ ◇

A bit earlier, back at the square near the east gate…

"Amazing… that's really amazing!"

Chloe was captivated by Rio's fighting as she stood at the entrance of the road to the square. Rio was leaping around the square, taking on the crowd of monsters alone.

"Gyah?!"

"Buhee?!"

The goblins and orcs were being cut down as soon as they approached Rio; the speed with which he dealt with them was even faster than that of Aria fighting on the road during the last encounter.

"Hey hey, Li'l Chloe. Just who is that guy fighting over there?" One of the adventurers who had come running as backup asked in awe.

"That's Sir Haruto — the one who saved Lady Liselotte. He's a skilled swordsman," Chloe replied without taking her eyes off the square. The person she had only met once, years ago, was freely swinging his sword about.

"That ain't just a skilled one, that…"

Most of the monsters in the square were attacking Rio, making him a one-man army. He turned the tables on every monster that attacked, making the creatures in the square meet their end with swiftness. Every so often monsters would sneak past him towards the road, but those were easy for Chloe and the others to deal with.

"…We don't need to help him?" the adventurer asked hesitantly. They could've drawn the attention of the monsters if they tried to assist recklessly, and there was no mistaking the fact they were hindrances to Rio, but the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

adventurer couldn't help but ask anyway.

"...We can't. The most we can do is get in his way. Blocking off the road here is a perfectly respectable role, and we'll finish off the monsters that get past Sir Haruto," Chloe replied calmly, but with a guilt-ridden face.

I'm not good enough. If I was at least as strong as the senior attendants... Rio was on too different of a level for her to measure accurately, but his power was at least equal to Aria. Chloe could not afford to butt in and make a fool of herself.

Haruto...

Chloe suddenly recalled the time he'd stayed at her family's inn several years ago. At the time, Haruto had been harassed by several adult adventurers, but had defended himself with ease. Back then, Chloe could do no more than watch the quarrel take place, getting frightened by the bloodshed and commotion before distancing herself from Haruto. What took place had always left an impression on her for some reason, and she had always regretted it.

"All right..." The adventurer must have sensed something from Chloe's shameful expression and nodded quietly.

"...Thank you. I'm sure that even Sir Haruto will need a break. We'll be the ones to fight in his place when that happens, so please ready yourself," Chloe stated with a serious look. No matter how much an enchanted sword could temporarily grant a person strength, once all the magic essence was depleted, the sword's power would no longer be usable and the wielder would simply return to being a regular human.

"Okay. In that case, leave the rear guard to us," the adventurer nodded in determination.

Meanwhile...

...*How strange.* Rio had an odd feeling as he fought. While he couldn't remember the exact number of monsters

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

he had taken down, it was easily in the hundreds. And yet—

Why won't the minotaur and humanoid monsters move forward?

The powerful monsters that were leading the pack showed no signs of stepping forward. In fact, they didn't look like they were going to move at all. The strength of those monsters would have been enough to burst into the city depths in one fell swoop, yet the minotaur had purposefully chosen to invade through the gates. It could have easily smashed through the wall or vaulted over it instead.

While it was convenient to have it on quiet standby as the defending side, its docileness was rather eerie.

Is it waiting for something? Rio thought.

The monsters were the ones attacking. They were savage creatures that should only have the goal of killing people, so it was assumed their intelligence didn't extend far past that. However, the fact they had gathered an army this large to attack, and not all at once, was curious. It was almost as though —

Invading the city isn't their goal?

But why would it do such a thing?

Aishia, has anything changed within the city? Rio asked through their telepathy. Because Aishia could sense the presence of the monsters to a degree, it was possible that she'd be able to notice any abnormalities.

Not in particular. The crowds in the square here are clearing up. Evacuation of the citizens should end soon, Aishia replied immediately.

Any changes in the monsters' movements?

None. Both east and west have blocked off the monsters.

...I see. Thank you. I'll try to come back soon, Rio informed Aishia after he'd noted that enough reinforcements had gathered by the road behind him. There were still monsters remaining, but he was a little worried about Celia.

Got it. I'll contact you immediately if anything happens.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Yup. The two of them ended their telepathy there.

“Chloe!” At that exact moment, Natalie and Cosette came running from the road facing the square. They were both wearing attendant uniforms that doubled as combat gear, just like Chloe.

“Natalie! Cosette!” Chloe’s expression brightened at the sight of her reliable superiors. The soldiers and adventurers also greeted them with composure.

“Erm, damage report?” Natalie asked in confusion, noticing the scene was a lot more peaceful than she expected.

“Umm, Sir Haruto is fighting alone…” Chloe replied, looking towards the square nervously. Even at this moment, Rio was slaughtering the approaching monsters. His movements were like a nimble acrobat, seeming almost beautiful.

“…Amazing, as expected.” Cosette’s gaze was already directed towards the square, captivated by the sight of Rio fighting.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Wow… But he should pull back soon, don’t you think? He’s been fighting for a while, right? His magic essence won’t last,” Natalie said worriedly.

“Indeed. Now that we’re here, he can retreat and rest,” Cosette agreed immediately. “Sir Haruto!”

Rio retreated to the road with perfect timing.

“Erm, I believe you’re Cosette and…”

“This is Natalie. I’m honored you remember me.” Cosette smiled happily.

“I’m Natalie, one of Lady Liselotte’s attendants. It’s nice to meet you, Sir Haruto. Thank you for your assistance in these trying times.” Natalie bowed respectfully.

“I thank you on behalf of my master.” Cosette lowered her head at Rio with a truly adorable smile.

Rio gave a short shake of his head, looking around at the monsters in the square before getting right to the point. “Not a problem. I actually have a small request.” The monsters seemed to be wary of Rio, observing from a distance.

“What is it?” Natalie asked.

“I actually made my acquaintances wait back at the inn, so they haven’t evacuated yet. I’d like to go back and meet up with them,” Rio stated succinctly.

“Is that… so…” Natalie hesitated for a moment.

It would be a hindrance to have Rio leave, as the minotaur and the unidentified monsters were still lying in wait behind the goblins and orcs. If they all attacked at once, it would be extremely difficult to defend the area.

However, Rio wasn’t a soldier or adventurer of Amande to begin with — he was meant to be a commoner with no military duties. His assistance right now was completely voluntary, so Natalie couldn’t insist that he stayed to fight.

However, Rio seemed to sense Natalie’s apprehension. “In exchange for leaving this place to you, I’ll finish off that minotaur. How about it?” he suggested as a compromise. Unlike the west gate, only one minotaur had spawned at the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

east gate. On top of that, there were fewer revenants than the west gate. The threat would lessen greatly if he defeated the minotaur.

"…You are a commoner, so of course. We have no reason to hold you back. But the minotaur is at the rear."

Natalie looked closely at the minotaur waiting outside the gate. Chronologically, it would have to be defeated last. While it could be attacked with long-distance magic, the minotaur's physical abilities would probably allow it to evade the speed of an average attack.

"No, I'll take care of it from here," Rio declared firmly.

"…E-Excuse me?" Natalie inclined her head in confusion at how that would be possible.

"Then… here I go."

Rio stepped into the fray again. A bright glow enveloped the blade of his sword as he stood poised with the tip pointed at the minotaur.

"Geehee?!" The monsters were glaring warily at Rio. Then, after communicating with a shared look, they all leapt at Rio at once. "Geeheehee!"

"?!" Natalie and the others gawked. A cannonball of magic essence coated in wind spirit arts had just burst from the tip of Rio's sword. The single shot traveled past the wall at the speed of sound.

"Geehee?!" The monsters that had leapt at Rio were blown away by the aftershock, and the cannonball of essence wrapped in wind ripped through the minotaur's heart with precision.

"M…rogh?! Mroh…?" Even the minotaur didn't understand what had happened. It had no time to react, finding itself kneeling to the ground. It died, just like that, crumbling helplessly.

I'll do one more push, just in case. With that thought, Rio poured essence into his sword again. A windstorm raged from his sword. Rio closed in on the monsters at the front

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

and slammed the storm into the monsters.

“Buhee?!” Several dozens of orcs and goblins were blown away.

“…” Natalie and the others behind her were completely stunned.

“Now, I’ll excuse myself here.” Rio turned back and bowed once, as Natalie returned to her senses with a gasp

“Y-Yes! Thank you so much!”

“…Sir Haruto is wonderful,” Cosette said vacantly to Rio, who couldn’t help but be confused.

“Huh?”

Natalie shoved Cosette away in a panic. “Geez, what are you saying?! Sir Haruto, please don’t mind this one and be along your way. Take care!”

“…Yes. The same goes for everyone here.” Rio smiled in faint amusement before rushing off to the center city where the inn was.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, inside Liselotte’s mansion, Hiroaki, Flora, Roanna, and Duke Huguenot had evacuated to a guest living room. Inside stood four knights as guards, including Stewart Huguenot and the elite squad commander, Raymond Brandt.

Hiroaki’s leg shook nervously while he sat on the sofa. “Ah… Is it normal for monsters to attack cities this regularly?”

“While it isn’t a regular occurence, it isn’t unheard of, either. There have been cities and towns that have been annihilated by monsters in the past,” Duke Huguenot answered calmly.

“I see…” Hiroaki heaved a dramatic sigh.

He seems to be rather worked up. The fear from the previous fight must be taking an effect. Duke Huguenot

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

narrowed his eyes. Normally, Hiroaki would be boasting to feign confidence.

"Hmph." Stewart huffed through his nose disparagingly as he looked at Hiroaki. He must have noticed, as he stared back at Stewart.

Realizing his mistake, Stewart cleared his throat with exaggeration. "...Excuse me. My throat was dry from nerves."

Duke Huguenot glared at Stewart, and he averted eyes from his father in a panic. A tense air hung over the room.

◇ ◇ ◇

Elsewhere, at the square just before Amande's west gate, Aria aggressively lead her subordinate attendants, experienced soldiers, and adventurers against the crowded square of monsters.

"There's just too many."

No matter how many they defeated, the monsters kept coming in from outside the gate. There were simply too many. Aria grumbled as she calmly beheaded the orc before her.

There's clearly more than when the monsters attacked in the forest. I'd love to clear them all up at once with large-scale magic, but I have to be careful not to run out of magic essence. Those things are waiting at the back, after all. She looked at the three minotaurs standing outside the gate.

"Guheehee." The minotaurs were enjoying the view from afar with unpleasant grins.

But it's baffling why they're not invading into the city. Aria furrowed her brows in suspicion. Just like Rio, she had doubts towards the actions the minotaurs were taking. However, while Aria had the same thoughts, she couldn't afford to move as freely as Rio. At least, not until she defeated the three minotaurs.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

It's a little risky, but I'll have to move forward a bit more, Aria decided boldly.

"Captain Mattias," she called out to a handsome male fighting nearby. He was in his late twenties and wearing higher quality combat clothes than the other soldiers, wielding a sword with a unique design in his hands. It was the enchanted sword Liselotte had temporarily lent him.

"What is it, Miss Aria?" The man named Mattias cut down an approaching monster easily before replying in a flirtatious tone unsuitable for a battlefield.

"It's disconcerting how the minotaurs have showed no movement. Shall we leave this place to the others and head outside the gate to take care of them?"

"...Just you and me?" Mattias asked, seemingly taken aback.

"Yes," Aria nodded solemnly.

"You serious?"

"This is not the time to be making jokes."

"I figured. Well, if it's an invitation from you, I guess so. Let's do it. I wouldn't want to exhaust myself here before facing those things last, anyway," Mattias said breezily, shrugging his shoulders.

Aria was about to reply, when...

"Kshaaa!" The dark-skinned revenants that had been waiting outside the gate suddenly let out a screech.

"Shaah!" The other revenants followed, all screeching one after another.

Aria braced herself with her brow furrowed in suspicion. "...What's going on?"

"MROOOOOH!" The minotaur let out a tremendous roar, loud enough to echo through all the areas of Amande.

"What? What is it?" Mattias asked in confusion.

"Kshaa!" The twenty or so revenants suddenly started running towards the gate all at once.

"What?!" Even Aria was taken aback by that. The

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

revenants used their inherent physical abilities to rush inside the gate.

“Bring those down no matter what!” Aria ordered with determination. And yet…

“MROOH!”

Suddenly, the minotaurs moved too. With nimble movements unsuited for their giant size, they made a running leap over the gate and straight to the middle of the square.

Despite the panic on her face, Aria voiced her orders calmly. “Attendants, take out the revenants! Everyone else, continue to concentrate on the goblins and orcs! Captain Mattias!”

“Got it. Let’s do something about those big guys!” Mattias responded resolutely.

◇ ◇ ◇

At the same time, at the north ramparts of Amande, Lucius and Reiss were hiding in a back alleyway.

“That’s the signal. I couldn’t hear any voices from the east, so I guess they were taken out,” Reiss muttered quietly.

“It’s finally our turn. My body’s stiff to all hell now.” Lucius said, stretching lazily.

“Let us hurry. It appears the decoy monsters will be eliminated faster than expected. The real show begins with you. I’m counting on you, Alphonse.” Reiss urged for their departure, looking at the black revenant standing near them.

“Yeah. Leave it. To me,” Alphonse said, nodding with a grin of delight.

◇ ◇ ◇

At the same time, Rio was moving towards the inn he had stayed in before. The monsters’ attack had begun when the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

surroundings were still dark, but now, the sun was rising and everything was much brighter. Citizens were still evacuating through the square before the inn, but there were much fewer people than before. The large numbers of soldiers directing the evacuation were gone too; it seemed as though the evacuation had proceeded smoothly. Then, just as Rio landed in front of the inn while surveying the area, the roar of the minotaur at the west gate echoed through the city.

"MROOOOOH!"

...*The voice of the minotaur at the west gate,* Rio guessed correctly. The situation was changing by the moment, and it was possible that the roar just now was a sign of something worse to come

I'd better hurry. Rio thought, heading into the inn and towards his room with haste. But the door opened from the other side first, Aishia coming out to greet Rio.

"Welcome home."

"I'm back, Aishia," Rio replied with a smile; Celia poked her head out from behind Aishia.

"Welcome back!" she said with a gentle smile of relief.

"I've returned — sorry for making you wait so long."

"No, that's fine... But how is it outside? I saw Aria heading towards the west gate from the window, but what was that roar just now...?"

"The number of monsters at the east gate has fallen a lot, so it should be fine now. I believe the roar was a minotaur at the west gate, but if Aria's there, then I think they'll be well-matched."

While Aria was could handle multiple minotaurs and revenants at an equal or higher level of combat to them, there were just too many monsters at the west gate. So he couldn't say anything too optimistic.

"What do we do now?" Aishia asked.

"I'm thinking of going on to assisting the defense of the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

city and having Professor and Aishia evacuate to outside of the city.” Not wanting to cause unnecessary concern, Rio hid the strange feeling he had about the monsters and told them his next actions.

“Got it,” Aishia nodded immediately with no hesitation. Celia watched Rio’s expression and nodded anxiously.

“…Okay.”

“With the professor in a safe location, I’ll be able to fight to my heart’s content too. Can I ask this of you?” Rio addressed Celia with a troubled look. Having it put that way made it hard for Celia to refuse.

“…Okay.” Despite the worried look on her face, Celia still nodded obediently.

“Thank you. Please evacuate outside the south gate. It leads to open farmland, and there are no monsters there. I’ll accompany you partway — if the streets are empty, we can fly through the air part of the way.”

“Yup, got it.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

◇ ◇ ◇

And so, Rio and the girls left the inn.

There were even less people in the square out front than before, but evacuating residents could still be spotted here and there. They were hurrying along, cowering from the minotaur’s roar.

“We should go too. This way.” Rio checked the sight of the evacuees before the inn and took a step towards south in order to lead Celia and Aishia.

“Haruto, monster!” Aishia exclaimed with a gasp.

“Kshaaa!” The revenant’s screech echoed through the square.

“…Sorry. I was slow to realize,” Aishia apologized guiltily.

“No, it’s fine. Your detection of them is purely intuitive.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Take the professor and fall back to the inn for now," Rio said. Thankfully, the revenants surging into the square had yet to notice their presence. However, there were people they had spotted. Just in front of them was a mother and daughter, running away from a grey-colored revenant that had targeted them.

"Eek...!" They screamed, parent and child cowering in fear.

"Rrrgh..." The revenant glared at the two with a ferocious look.

The mother, around her thirties, collapsed as her knees gave out. "Ah..."

"N-No! Don't come closer! Go away!" The girl was around ten years old and stood before her mother resolutely.

"Mireille, run away!" The mother called out to her daughter in a panic. An unpleasant possibility crossed the back of Rio's head; he definitely didn't want Celia to see this.

This is bad. Rio burst into a run on reflex.

Using wind spirit arts to push himself forward and accelerate, he moved at a tremendous speed to close the distance between them in an instant.

The revenant was sent flying by Rio's punch. "Gufuh?!" It crashed to the ground with a loud noise and rolled.

"Kshaaa?!" The other revenants in the square noticed the commotion. There were others besides the mother and daughter that had been targeted by the revenants, but all the revenants now had their attention drawn to Rio. There was a total of four of them, including the one Rio had just sent flying.

"Over here!" Rio yelled to attract even more attention to himself, drawing his sword from the sheath at his waist.

"Shaah!" With that, the revenants all attacked Rio at once. Rio charged towards the closest approaching revenant and thrust his sword through its heart, ending it in one blow.

"?!" The other two froze in shock. Rio took that

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

opportunity to close in on one of them, once more thrusting his sword through its heart with precision. Then, once he pulled his sword out, He turned back and landed a knee-kick into the abdomen of the other one approaching from behind.

"Vuh…!" The revenant easily lifted into the air. Rio kicked off the ground and pursued its body in an instant, finishing it off in a similar single blow by stabbing it through the heart. All that was left was the one Rio punched away first.

"Vurrgh…" Rio closed in on it instantly as it staggered back to its feet, and once again, stabbed it through the heart like the others to finish it off.

He withdrew his sword. "…Phew." With the mental fatigue kicking in, he sighed quietly.

"…T-Thank you so much!" The mother that had been watching Rio's fight in a daze snapped back to her senses after a pause and thanked him.

"…No, I'm just glad to see you aren't hurt. Can you stand?" Rio asked, approaching the mother and offering his hand.

"Yes, I'll manage…" The mother grabbed Rio's hand and hesitantly stood up.

"T-Thank you so much, mister! Mom, are you all right?" Mireille asked, running over to support her mother.

"I'm fine," the mother replied, giving an awkward smile to reassure her daughter.

"Mom? Mireille?!"

Chloe came running in her attendant uniform. She stopped in her tracks when she spotted Rio, before her expression changed at the sight of the mother and daughter. They appeared to be family.

Chloe's mother. Hm? That means… she's the innkeeper from back then, huh? Rio realized the mother was the one who had managed the inn he had stayed in several years ago. He also recalled there was a little sister, though he had forgotten her name.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“U-Umm, why are my mother and sister…?” Chloe asked Rio in confusion.

“We were being attacked by monsters when this man saved us! He was really strong!” Mireille explained proudly.

“R-Really? Thank you for saving them!”

“It was nothing… But why are you here, Chloe?” Rio asked. “U-Umm, because some of the humanoid monsters got into the city, so the others went to exterminate them while I was sent to report to Lady Liselotte,” Chloe answered with a troubled look. She seemed to be in a hurry, and her explanation was sparse. Just then, other citizens started gathering nearby.

“Ooh, Li’l Chloe!”

“Are ya hurt, Rebecca?”

“Thanks a lot, boy. You really saved us.”

Everything got noisier all at once.

“Ah, umm… S-Sorry. I’m in a bit of a hurry right now. Could everyone here quickly evacuate within the north walls? If you inform the soldiers at the ramparts, I’m sure they’ll let you in.” In her rush, Chloe gave only essential instructions.

“Oh, that’s right. Okay, you get outta here, Li’l Chloe! We’ll evacuate with this boy here,” A good-natured middle-aged man said, looking at Rio.

“No, umm…” Rio had no intention of heading to the north district, so he found himself at a loss for how to answer.

“Go send them off, Haruto.” Celia said, appearing with Aishia in tow. The two of them had cloaks on top of their clothes with hoods that hid their faces.

“Cecilia…” Rio looked at Celia and frowned worriedly.

“It’s okay — you don’t have to worry about me.” Celia said to Rio apologetically. The ramparts were right before them anyway; even if he were to go there, it wouldn’t take much time to reach the entrance.

“…I understand. I’ll get going, then.”

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Rio steeled himself to head towards the gate of the north ramparts.

◇ ◇ ◇

Rio and the others arrived at the rampart gate within a matter of minutes. There were soldiers waiting before the gate, but like Chloe had said, they were allowed inside without incident.

“Phew, we can finally take a breather. Thanks again, mister.” Chloe’s little sister Mireille sighed in relief and thanked Rio once more.

“It wasn’t a big deal. All I did was walk with you.”

Honestly, all he had done was walk with them for the short distance between the square and the gate. No other revenants appeared along the way. From here onwards, it was the duty of the soldiers to protect them, so Rio’s job here was done.

“Excuse me. Firstly, thank you for escorting the citizens this far. If I may so ask, are you perhaps Sir Haruto?” One of the soldiers guarding the rampart interior asked Rio.

“…Yes, I am.” Rio nodded curiously, surprised his name and face was known by a stranger.

“So it was you after all. We were informed of your party’s appearance, so it was easy to spot you.”

“My party’s appearance?”

“Yes. The soldier took Rio aside and quietly explained things to him with a bashful glance at Celia and Aishia. “The truth is, Lady Liselotte has given us strict orders to escort you and your acquaintances to her mansion for shelter at the highest priority.” Celia and Aishia currently had their hoods lowered to speak with Mireille.

“Ah, I see.” Rio had an idea what the soldier was talking about; after all, Celia and Aishia certainly had an appearance that drew attention.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“I shall lead the way immediately, so please follow me. The mansion is the safest place right now, and both you and your acquaintances will be sheltered,” the soldier said with confidence.

Rio glanced at Celia. While he was conversing with the soldier, Mireille and the others were being led away by another soldier.

“Thank you for helping too, miss!” Mireille thanked Celia and Aishia politely before leaving.

Rio hesitated for a moment, but soon nodded his head. “...Then we shall take you up on your offer. Please lead the way.”

They had greatly swerved off course from his original plan to head outside the south gate, but it would be too unnatural to turn back now. Not to mention the possibility of encountering more revenants if they did. Taking refuge at the mansion was an acceptable alternative plan.

“Understood. Please, follow me.” The soldier bowed respectfully before taking the lead.

◇ ◇ ◇

A short time later...

Most of Liselotte’s personnel had relocated to the temporary command post in the garden, leaving the mansion essentially deserted. The only ones that remained in the mansion were those under heavy protection, like Hiroaki and the others.

“This way.” A dark black-skinned revenant walked along confidently inside the mansion. Lucius followed along behind it. Further behind him were four less dark-skinned revenants, walking in obedient silence.

“Sure makes things easier with a tour guide. Something impossible for the enhanced revenants.” Lucius bantered casually with no sense of tension at all.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Hmph. The guest room. Is beyond the corner. Of that corridor,” Alphonse huffed somewhat unhappily.

“Gotcha. Right, so from here on it’ll be your time to shine. Leave the princess unharmed. You can smack the hero around too, as long as you don’t kill him,” Lucius informed Alphonse without any particular concern in his voice.

“Yeah. Leave it. To me. I’m stronger. Than any minotaur. Right now,” Alphonse replied with his disjointed words.

“Ah… Is that leftover intelligence you have left, or are you just broken? Well, whatever. Get going.” Lucius scratched his head before apathetically sending Alphonse away.

“Is someone there?” A voice echoed from down the corridor, having picked up on their conversation. It seemed to be the knights on guard in front of the room.

“Yeah, there is,” Lucius replied easily, showing no panic at all.

“Who’s there?” the voice asked dubiously from down the corridor.

“Oh no, it’s nothing. I’ve just got a little bit of business to tend to before making my way back. Don’t let it worry you.”

“…Wait. Step out of there.” The presumed knight ordered down the corridor in a stern voice.

“Good grief.” Lucius sighed in exasperation before walking forwards into the corridor. There were two knights standing on guard before the door to the room.

One of the knights approached Lucius and questioned him. “An adventurer? Are you alone? You were talking to someone, no?”

“Nah no one else. Feel free to go see for yourself.” Lucius assumed a cooperative attitude, standing to the side to make way and shrugging his shoulders.

◇ ◇ ◇

Less than a minute later, *thunk* went the sound of

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

something hitting against the door of the room Hiroaki and the others were waiting in.

"...Hey, did you hear something against the door just now?" Hiroaki asked, staring at the door as he asked the others around him.

"Indeed I did," Duke Huguenot nodded, sending an order to the knights with a look.

"Yes, sir." There were four knights including Stewart guarding the inside of the room. One of them slowly moved to the door and opened it with a creak.

"Hey, what happened?!"

A pitch black fist came flying through the doorway. The knight was struck squarely in the face and sent flying towards the back of the room. Hitting several pieces of furniture along the way, he came to a stop with a loud crash.

"Kyaa?!" Flora, who had been sitting nearby, couldn't help but scream.

"W-What's going on?!" Roanna looked at the door in shock. "Ha. Ha. Ha." The dark black-skinned revenant, Alphonse stood there and grinned eerily. Behind him were four paler black-skinned revenants.

"M-Monsters?! How could they be here?!" The other three knights — including Stewart — drew their swords reflexively.

"Go," Alphonse ordered shortly.

"Vaah!" His subordinate revenants screeched and charged into the room. "*Augendae Corporis*!" The knights chanted at the same time, but the one to two seconds it took for the magic to activate were fatal. The revenants closed the gap and attacked the knights before they could finish enchanting their physical abilities.

"Shit!" The knights had no choice but to cancel their magic and swing their swords... but unfortunately, there was no way they could hurt the revenants without enhancing their physical abilities.

"They're rock hard?!" Steel-like skin deflected the blades

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

of their swords.

“Graagh!” The grey revenants went up one on one against the knights, grinning in delight. There were three knights and four grey revenants, which left one grey revenant and Alphonse free.

“Hey, what is the security doing?!” Hiroaki suddenly shouted at the corridor, but no one came running to save them.

“Hmph. Go.” Alphonse snorted in contempt, giving the order to the remaining revenant. It started running gleefully, charging into the back of the room to harass Hiroaki’s group.

“Shit! Head for the door! Run!” Realizing they would be cornered rats at this rate, Hiroaki ordered Flora and the others beside him before running for the door in a panic. He wasn’t just a hero for show, as his movements were clearly inhuman in speed.

“Eh, ah…” Unable to react on the spur of the moment, Flora was confused, but Roanna suddenly grabbed her by the arm.

“Princess Flora, this way!” Roanna said and ran after Hiroaki’s lead.

Thankfully, the knights were somehow managing to push back the revenants one by one. The room was spacious, leaving plenty of room for them to run between the gaps of the fights taking place.

On top of that, the leftover revenant that charged into the back of the room was just cackling to itself in delight, showing no signs of attacking them.

And so, as long as they managed to do something about the pitch black revenant camping before the only doorway in or out, they’d be able to get out. Duke Huguenot seemed to be thinking the same, following after Hiroaki behind Roanna and the others.

Their only hope was Hiroaki and his secret hero combat abilities. He had technically been on par or above with the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

knights in their sparring matches before. While he was fairly agitated at the moment, unlike the previous battle, he was heading for the monsters himself this time. It seemed like he wouldn't be useless from fear this time.

"Move it! Come, Yamata no Orochi!" Hiroaki summoned his prided divine arms to his hand. With the beautiful blade in his grasp, he swung the sword at Alphonse, but Alphonse saw through Hiroaki's movement easily and slipped right up close to him.

"Hmph." Alphonse snorted, punching Hiroaki's face with all his might.

"Gwoah?!" Hiroaki was easily blown to the back of the room.

"I've always. Wanted. To beat. This guy's face in." Alphonse cackled with satisfied laughter.

I-It talked?! W-What is this?! What in the world is that?! It's so creepy! Roanna felt an instinctive sense of revulsion from the bottom of her heart at the fact the pitch black monster before her had spoken. Goosebumps crawled across her skin. The half-human-like shape of its body made it creepy already, but when it spoke human words, it was absolutely revolting.

"P-Princess Flora, get behind me..." Roanna said. She believed it was her role as a noble to become the shield for royalty. Meanwhile, Duke Huguenot was recoiling in a bad state.

"Kuh..." The knights were still fighting with the three revenants and unable to use their magic to enhance their abilities, so they were suffering quite a bit. Their breakthrough plan with Hiroaki had been flipped so easily, and there was nowhere left to run.

"You're next. I won't. Let you off. Easy. Understand?" Alphonse looked at Duke Huguenot intently, mouth twisting in a sinister grin.

"...What?" Duke Huguenot looked dubious. The capability

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

to communicate meant there was a chance of mutual understanding. He suddenly wondered if they could obtain some kind of information.

“Ahaha!” But there was no time to think about that. In a single bound, Alphonse leapt upon Duke Huguenot and pummeled his fist with just the right about of power held back into Duke Huguenot’s abdomen.

“Guh. Gah… kgh…” Duke Huguenot collapsed to the floor, unable to stand the attack.

“F-Father!” Stewart’s expression changed when he realized Duke Huguenot was being attacked. He frantically swung his sword, trying to brush off the revenant he was facing. Meanwhile, Alphonse grabbed Duke Huguenot by the collar and lifted him easily off the ground.

“There’s still. More. Where that. Came from!”

“Hah, kknhh…” Duke Huguenot struggled to breathe, writhing in agony.

“Father! Move, you monster!” Stewart swung his sword desperately, moving the revenant in front of him out of his way. It let out a sinister cackle with a twisted grin.

“…No, Father! Release me!” Stewart attacked Alphonse desperately. Alphonse lightly evaded Stewart’s attack before tossing Duke Huguenot to the side roughly.

“Hee! Heehee! Oh, I know. I know.” With a pleasant smile, Alphonse turned back to Stewart.

“Shit! Die, die!”

“That. Won’t work.” Stewart swung his sword intently, but Alphonse’s inherently tough skin made his sword bounce off without a scratch.

“…Princess Flora, you at least must escape.” Roanna slowly inched towards the door, whispering to Flora quietly.

“Eh, ah… but you… but what about everyone?!” Flora’s expression changed with a gasp, showing deep disapproval.

“The physical abilities of that monster are abnormal. It’s amusing itself right now for some reason, but we’ll all be

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

wiped out at this rate. Even if we tried to run, there's a high possibility we'd be caught before we can use any magic. So at the very least, let us become decoys for you to get away," Roanna said, giving a hurried but organized attempt at persuasion.

"N-No, I can't! I can't… that's too…"

"Please, I beg you. If you let this chance go…" Roanna looked at Stewart in a panic.

"You monster! *Monster*!" Stewart had become desperate, slashing away at Alphonse, but it was clear that Alphonse was toying with him.

"Gahah. Gahahaha!" Alphonse laughed loudly, mocking Stewart. The same went for the revenants dealing with the other knights. Alphonse must have inspired them, as they were similarly laughing as they dealt with the knights.

"Damn it!" The knights facing them were pale and breathing heavily — they wouldn't last long in this situation.

This was the only moment Flora could get away.

"Princess Flora! Princess Flora!" A voice calling for Flora could be heard down the corridor.

"Oh! Princess Flora is safe! Please help her escape!" Roanna suddenly thrust Flora towards the open doorway with all her might. Then she stood in front of the door to block it from any pursuing revenants.

"Kshaah!" The revenant at the back of the room started running towards Roanna.

"Roanna!" Flora called Roanna's name in a panic, still in her state on the floor. Then, a man appeared from outside the room, grabbing Flora's hand and easily pulling her into standing.

"Princess Flora, this way."

"L-Let go of me!"

"I cannot do that. You must come this way."

Flora objected heavily, but the man led her away from the scene without listening to her protests.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, Roanna used offensive magic to push back the revenants in the room.

"*Photon Projectilis.*"

A magic circle appeared at her hands, firing high-speed bullets of magic energy from its center. Roanna's aim was precise and landed directly on the revenants that approached her from deeper in the room.

"Guh?!" The revenants that were hit in the body by the bullets staggered.

"There's still more where that came from!" Roanna shot her bullets at the revenants facing the other knights. One shot, two shots, three — the bullets pummeled them mercilessly.

"Ah. Was I. Hit?" While Alphonse felt the impact, he brushed it off with a tilt of his head.

"?!" But Roanna didn't falter; she continued hitting the revenants with her photon bullets.

"Argh!" An annoyed voice laced in furious anger echoed through the room. Roanna flinched and unthinkingly cancelled the magic she had activated.

"Ah?" The revenants attention was drawn in the direction of the angry voice. Duke Huguenot was collapsed on the floor, and the knights were exhausted. Which left —

"Yeah, I'm mad. I'm really mad now. Getting punched by those filthy hands of yours… Disgusting." Standing there was Sakata Hiroaki.

"…You're. Surprisingly tough. I hit you. With my full. Power." Alphonse narrowed his eyes, impressed.

"Die, you cockroach!" Hiroaki yelled, attacking the unoccupied revenant nearby. The revenant promptly assumed a guard stance with both its arms raised, but —

"Guh?!" Its body was cleanly divided into two with a bam.

"This is total shit. Just die already," Hiroaki said, moving

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

to slash at the next nearby revenant in succession. His speed surpassed that of the paler black-skinned revenant, allowing him to exterminate the second one just as easily.

“Ugh, now I’m pissed off!” Hiroaki’s anger showed no signs of waning. He glared at the revenants with eyes full of loathing.

“S-Sir Hiroaki?!” Roanna’s eyes widened at the sudden change in the young man.

“Move, Roanna! I’ll kill them all!” Hiroaki yelled, charging towards Alphonse. Roanna couldn’t stand it and escaped to the side of the room.

“Grarh!” The remaining revenants attacked Hiroaki from both sides.

“Shut up!” Hiroaki swung his sword with a ridiculous stance, cutting down the revenants in a single swing. His blade was exceptionally sharp.

“What?!” Alphonse’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“You’re next, bastard! Die!” Hiroaki charged at Alphonse — the final one remaining — and gave a great swing of his sword from afar. Then, an abnormal amount of water came jetting out of the blade.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Guh?!” Alphonse stepped back reflexively, twisting his body to evade the attack as he retreated into the corridor. Immediately, a torrent of water shot through the air. The blast of water pierced straight through the mansion wall, flying outside.

“Y-You!” Despite Alphonse’s enraged fury, he continued retreating into the corridor.

“Hold it!” Hiroaki promptly pursued him into the corridor, leaving Roanna and the other wounded men in the room. Once Hiroaki jumped out into the corridor, his eyes locked on Alphonse in the narrower space. He moved to launch another straight attack, but —

“Goodness,” a flat voice said.

“Ah?!” Hiroaki turned back toward the voice and instantly received a strong blow to the neck. His head was rocked violently, making him black out in no time at all. He fell to the floor heavily.

“Y-You’re…” Alphonse’s eyes widened in shock. Standing before him was Reiss. Sharp eyes looked down at Hiroaki from underneath his robe.

“…You, outside. Your role here is over. Go with the other revenants and buy time for Lucius to flee from here,” Reiss ordered Alphonse coolly.

“What? But…” Alphonse made to argue back.

“Just go already,” Reiss said in a hollow voice, interrupting any rebuttal.

“A-All right.”

“Good. There should be interesting prey for you outside as well. Now, I must hurry,” Reiss stated, departing from the scene promptly. Meanwhile, Alphonse headed outside the walls through the hole Hiroaki had opened up. Then, one beat later, Roanna nervously stuck her head out of the room.

“…S-Sir Hiroaki!” Upon noticing Hiroaki collapsed on the corridor floor, she hurriedly ran to him. However, once she saw he was breathing, she realized he was simply knocked

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

out and sighed in relief.

Meanwhile, Reiss was lurking around the corner of the corridor.

Perhaps it was a mistake to call Lucius after all. While his abilities are exceptional, his ephemeral hedonism shows on his face as soon as he gets excited. He is more beast than man, really. The plan looks like it will work out, but at the cost of some needless headaches, Reiss thought as he quietly watched Roanna's face.

That Alphonse too… The way he immediately ran to play in his excitement shows how far he is from the perfect specimen. Well, the base human was an imperfect creature to begin with, Reiss lamented.

"Well, he will be disposed of here. At least I'll be able to measure the strength of the humanoid spirit and contractor before I leave," he muttered before departing.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, a bit earlier, Flora's hand was being pulled along by an unknown man.

"Umm, please, please let go of me! Where are you going?! We have — We have to call for help!" Flora protested at the man forcefully tugging her along while looking at the room behind her with Roanna and the others. The man was wearing a hood, hiding even his profile.

"Nah, that little lady's already done for. She'll be ruthlessly torn to pieces any moment now. If they weren't playing around, it would've been over in ten seconds or so." The man walking before her cackled in delight.

"Y-You… Who are you?" Flora asked fearfully. At a glance, he looked like an adventurer dispatched to protect the mansion, but something was clearly wrong. She wondered if he was taking advantage of the commotion.

The man suddenly came to a stop. "Nah, I'm not someone

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

worth naming myself. But I suppose it'd be rude not to say in this position, so… Well, I'm human trash." He faced Flora and temporarily removed his hood to answer with a grin, and Flora finally saw the man's face clearly.

It was Lucius.

"U-Umm…" Flora stumbled for words.

"Ah, it was so funny earlier, I couldn't help but watch for a bit. The good old fashioned servant-master relationship of royalty and nobility is so beautiful to see. What a wonderful scene that was indeed. I almost wanted to ruin it." Lucius chatted away in a somewhat worked up state.

Flora was overcome with an indescribable fear and yelled in a panic. "S-Someone! Is anyone there?!"

"Hahaha, so you want to call for help? Well, be my guest." Lucius smiled pleasantly, speaking to Flora.

"Y-You… What are you…?" Flora asked, clueless as to what Lucius' aim was. Lucius had taken on a completely defiant attitude, making him seem so unnerving.

"Well, I'm here to kidnap you, actually. Though if I'm being honest, it doesn't matter *how* I accomplish that, so I think I'll have some of my own fun," Lucius said indifferently.

"…I-I am your target? And you are using this chaotic situation to kidnap me?" Flora asked with a trembling voice.

"Well, to put it simply… yes. But bringing you back so easily like this is a little too boring. I'm going through all this trouble already, so I'm thinking of leaving my mark on you," Lucius answered smoothly, grin on his face. Flora fell silent in question.

"For example, the little lady who entrusted you to me. What kind of face do you think she'll make when she finds out she made the wrong judgement? Just imagining it thrills me," Lucius said in an extremely flippant tone.

"…" For the first time in her life, Flora felt an indescribable sense of revulsion at the excessive wickedness

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

in his words.

“Hahaha. For now, just seeing that expression of yours is enough. And didn’t I tell you earlier? The little lady’s done for already.” Lucius’ mouth twisted in a grin as reality sunk into Flora with despair.

“Ah — L-Let go of me, let go of me please!” Flora startled in alarm, trying once again to release herself from Lucius’ hold.

“Yet again, you…” Reiss appeared, addressing to Lucius from behind.

“Hey,” Lucius replied casually.

“Stop dawdling here and move already. The humanoid spirit has already come to the mansion. It would be bad to face that head to head,” Reiss said, sighing tiredly.

“Oh…?” Lucius’ eyes widened in interest.

“Just so you know…” Reiss started saying.

“I know, I know. I’ll head to the rendezvous point after this, so don’t worry. Just let me choose my own route, yeah?” Lucius said vaguely.

“Go, then,” Reiss sighed once more, urging Lucius away.

“You heard the man, princess. Come along now. Don’t put up a fight unless you want those beautiful legs to become severed.” Lucius put his hood on once more, then picked up Flora and threw her over his shoulder without letting in a word of protest.

“Eek — Kya?!” Flora screamed, but was bluntly ignored.

“Up we go.”

Lucius proceeded to run down the corridor, disappearing somewhere. Moments later, Hiroaki’s rage caused a cannon of water to blow a hole in the wall.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Chapter 8: Daybreak Rondo

While Alphonse was punching Hiroaki in the face, Rio and the others were being escorted to Liselotte's mansion by the soldiers on hand. The sight of Liselotte bustling about the garden to give orders soon came into view.

"Lady Liselotte, I have brought Sir Haruto and his two companions," the soldier called, hurrying to report to Liselotte.

"...Haruto, I can feel the unpleasant presence of monsters from that mansion." Aishia muttered, staring directly at the mansion with a severe look.

"Eh?" Rio followed her gaze, but there was only silence around the mansion. There was no sign of any commotion going on around there, and neither Liselotte nor those around her seemed particularly bothered.

Liselotte came running over to Rio. "Sir Haruto, I'm glad to see you and your two companions are safe."

"Yes, somehow..." Rio replied in slight confusion.

"I heard you stopped the monsters at the east gate until reinforcements could arrive. Thank you very much for that. Unfortunately, though I would still like to talk to you more, this is an emergency situation. You'll be safe inside the mansion, so please come this way. I shall lead you." Liselotte must have been in a rush, as she immediately tried to lead Rio and the girls to the mansion.

"...Did any monsters sneak in here?" Rio asked with a serious look.

"Are you referring to the humanoid monsters? I did hear that some managed to get into the city, but with your assistance, my attendants were able to put an end to them

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

outside the ramparts. I haven't received any reports from the soldiers patrolling the ramparts of anything otherwise, either…" Liselotte answered, looking at Rio's expression curiously.

"I… see." Rio frowned with a troubled look. Even if he told her there were monsters in the mansion, she didn't have any reason to believe him. There was no knowing if she'd believe him even if he explain Aishia's background too.

"…Is there something you are concerned with?" Liselotte asked, sensing something was up.

"Yes, there seems to be a strange aura coming from the mansion. Is there anyone inside?"

"The hero and Princess Flora have taken refuge inside, and their knights are guarding them. I'll send a servant to confirm." Just as Liselotte suggested that, a tremendous booming sound echoed from the mansion.

"Kya?!" Celia and Liselotte couldn't help but scream.

"That's…" Rio immediately directed his gaze at the source of the sound. A giant hole had opened in the wall of the second floor, and a torrent of water poured out from it.

"W-What?!" Liselotte said in shock. At that very moment, a hooded Lucius came bursting out of the mansion's front door in a rush.

"Hahaha, coming through!" Kicking and struggling over his shoulder was none other than Flora.

"Let go of me! Ah, there are monsters inside! Roanna, and the hero! Someone, please save them!" Flora said incoherently. She had been trying to escape the hold restraining her when she'd noticed the allies around her.

"Didn't I say I'd cut your legs off if you struggled?" Lucius hit the back of Flora's legs with the side of his hand in a karate chop. Since Flora was being carried facing backwards, she mistook the sensation for a blade and let out a frightened squeak.

Liselotte couldn't understand why Flora was being carried

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

like that, but she clearly sensed there was something bad about the situation and gave an order on the spot. “Someone apprehend that man!”

“Nope! Too slow! The princess is mine! Try if you want, but you ain’t getting her back!” The speed with which Lucius was running was abnormal. He burst out of the estate grounds before the formation surrounding him was even completed. It was as though he was enjoying the chase. Meanwhile, Rio reacted to Lucius’ voice, eyes widening intensely.

“Could that voice be…?”

Rio’s heart thudded in his chest. It was similar to the low tone of the man’s voice that grated on his ears… A voice he would never forget. Rio wanted to run after him right away, but waves of pale black revenants were swarming out of the mansion’s front door.

“Graaargh!” The revenants started attacking the people nearby indiscriminately, and pandemonium fell upon the garden in an instant. Furthermore, from the hole in the wall of the mansion appeared another, pitch black revenant — Alphonse.

“Hmph.” Alphonse leapt down and glanced over the scene in the garden. He snorted.

“Kshaaa!” One of the rampaging revenants suddenly attacked Rio’s group.

Rio drew his sword in a flash, thrusting it through the heart of the approaching revenant. “Gwah?!” it cried out.

“…The three of you should stand back.” Rio said to Celia and the others behind him as his eyes followed Lucius’ retreating back with an extremely frustrated expression.

“Go, Haruto.” Aishia said.

“…Aishia?”

“You’re upset, no?”

Rio’s eyes widened at how Aishia had seen through him. “But…” Rio frowned as he looked at Celia. There was a great

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

number of revenants. In a battlefield this chaotic, there was a chance Celia could be in danger too.

"No, Haruto," Celia said in a cool voice.

"…Cecilia?" Rio's eyes widened slightly.

"Remember what I said to you. You need to prioritize what you think is right — no, what your feelings tell you to do. Though we're in opposite positions, it's a similar situation to when you saved me, no? I don't want you to make that face because of me. You look like you're suffocating right now," Celia said with a sad frown.

"…Okay." Rio nodded with quite the guilty look. He wanted to act purely for his own sake right now, but he was feeling extremely reluctant about it, wondering if this was something that could be forgiven. However, he was the one who had said a similar thing when he pushed Celia out of the marriage she didn't want.

"It's my turn to save you this time. Well, I can't do much compared to you, but… *Terra Carcerem*." Celia suddenly crouched down and placed both her hands against the ground, chanting a spell. A magic circle immediately appeared on the surface, and the magic activated with practically no delay at all.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

A short distance away from them, the ground rose in four directions and completely enclosed some revenants running about in a prison made of earth. Like its name implied, *Terra Carcerem* was magic that created a prison of earth and enclosed the target within.

"Wh…" Seeing that made Liselotte's eyes widen in astonishment. The ability to activate magic with practically no delay was already worth a reaction of surprise, but to be able to enclose a target moving at high speed from a long distance with such ease could almost be considered godly.

"Like I said, I can fight too." Celia grinned at Rio.

"Haruto, it'll be fine. I'm here too. You can leave Cecilia to me," Aishia stated flatly, shoving Rio's back.

"That's right. Now go. You can still catch up from here, right?" Celia said, giving Rio firm words of encouragement.

"…Right. Aishia, if you can, please look after Lady Liselotte too." Rio nodded.

"Yup, leave it to me." Aishia nodded with determination.

"Thanks. Lady Liselotte, please allow me to retrieve Princess Flora." No sooner had Rio said those words, he had enhanced his entire body and started running at full speed. He drew his sword and activated his wind spirit arts through it, using a blast of wind to propel him forward and accelerate him more.

"Wha…" Liselotte's jaw dropped as she watched Rio leave.

◇ ◇ ◇

Once Rio had departed…

"Cecilia, protect yourself and the other person with the magic that makes an essence barrier. I'm going to reduce their numbers," Aishia ordered Celia behind her.

"Got it. *Magicae Murum,*" Celia replied promptly. A magic circle appeared around Celia's hand, forming a transparent barrier of magic essence. The barrier of essence

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

formed a dome that stretched from the front of Celia all the way around to Liselotte behind her.

"Wh…" Liselotte was once again shocked into widening her eyes. The *Magicae Murum* Celia had just used was that spectacular.

She covered an area of 360 degrees around her in an instant?! And that earth prison earlier… Just how skilled at controlling essence is this person?! Who is she? Magicae Murum happened to be a magic where the caster's essence amount greatly affected the size of the barrier formed. If one was skilled at controlling their essence, they could change the shape of the barrier freely to a certain degree, but forming a dome shape was particularly difficult.

On top of that, it was also a feat to maintain the barrier formed, not to mention the fact that the larger the area of the barrier, the more essence was consumed in maintaining its strength. At the very least, none of Liselotte's attendants could form an essence barrier at the same speed and shape as Celia, then maintain that through a real fight.

That being said, she couldn't afford to simply stew in her surprise. "Eh, ah… Will she be all right, unarmed like that?!" Liselotte snapped back to her senses at Aishia's lack of weapon and questioned Celia in a panic.

"It'll be fine. She's as strong as Haruto!" Celia stated with confidence.

Once Aishia confirmed that Celia had established an essence barrier behind her — "*Augendae Corporis*," she chanted. But she hadn't used magic; because Aishia was a spirit, spell formulas couldn't be embedded within her body to obtain magic. She'd used sorcery instead, using the bracelet artifact Rio lent her beforehand to use as a camouflage when fighting in front of other people. A magic circle immediately appeared around the bracelet, casting an enchantment of physical abilities on Aishia's entire body. However, Aishia canceled the sorcery as soon as she

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

activated it and instead casted her own spirit art to enhance her physical body. This way, it looked like she had used an artifact to enchant her physical abilities to everyone else.

However, the capabilities of a magic physical ability enchantment and spirit arts physical body enhancement were vastly different. A physical body enhancement based on spirit arts strengthened not only the physical abilities, but the physical body too. That was why it could bring out abilities that surpassed the limits of a human body.

“Grah!” Suddenly, a revenant leapt at Aishia, but she easily parried the revenant’s attack barehanded.

“Gah?!” Aishia knocked the attacking revenant off balance and flung it at another nearby revenant with all her might. The other revenant was in the middle of pressuring Chloe, but — “Gragh?!” The body Aishia threw crashed into it, sending the two revenants rolling on the floor.

“...Eh?” Chloe was completely bewildered by the sudden disappearance of the revenant in front of her. One beat later, she sighed in relief. Meanwhile, the revenants that Aishia had sent rolling were glaring at her with hatred and growling lowly.

“Lend me that,” Aishia said to Chloe, holding out her hand.

“Huh?” Chloe inclined her head blankly. The only object she was holding was a roughly two-meter-long short spear. Did Aishia really mean that?

“Lend me the spear. You can fall back,” Aishia stated in a flat voice.

“U-Umm...” Chloe was confused.

“Chloe, lend it to her immediately! Fall back!” Liselotte commanded, showing her quick wit.

Other than her attendants, there were barely any soldiers at the mansion right now who could face a revenant. Even then, many of those attendants had trouble with close ranged battles. This particularly applied to Chloe, who was

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

still a novice that couldn't take on a revenant alone. Liselotte had no choice but to believe the skillful martial arts she just witnessed and Celia's statement that Aishia's strength was on par with Haruto.

"Y-Yes, my lady! Here you are!" Chloe immediately obeyed her master's order and offered Aishia the spear she was holding.

"Thank you. Tell the others to fall back too. I'll do the rest," Aishia said quietly before dashing off.

"She's so fast!" For a moment, it looked like Aishia had disappeared, making Chloe gaze in wonder. Before she knew it, Aishia was in a different location, closing in on a revenant from the side.

"Gragh?!" The revenant didn't notice Aishia's approach and was swiftly slayed.

"Whoa!" With the revenant fighting before them suddenly cut down, the several soldiers that were facing it together raised their voice in surprise.

"Fall back," Aishia said, closing in on the next revenant and slaying it. She continued to exterminate revenants one after another by coming up from behind and the side to surprise them. Everyone who was engaged in battle with the revenants were taken aback by that sight, their attention locked on Aishia's fighting.

Amazing. She really is as strong as Sir Haruto, isn't she?! I wonder who would be stronger between her and Aria? First Sir Haruto, then this sorcerer girl... just who are these people? Liselotte's shock and questions muddled together, making her eyes widen in amazement.

"Gruuh!" The other revenants finally caught on to Aishia's conspicuous actions and attention began to spread out to surround her. Surprise attacks would probably be less effective from here.

"She'll be okay, right?" Liselotte asked Celia worriedly.

"...Let's believe in her." Despite her face clouding with

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

concern, Celia nodded her head firmly. *Isn't that right, Aishia?*

It had been Aishia's decision to make the others withdraw. They had distanced themselves from the revenants as ordered and were watching over Aishia's fight.

"...Mm?" Meanwhile, Alphonse — who had decided to overlook the battlefield from above — fixed his gaze on Aishia. He narrowed his eyes dubiously. He seemed to realize something, mouth twisting with a wicked grin. "That woman. From. The inn!"

"Hey! Don't kill. That woman!" Alphonse bellowed his order at the revenants.

"I-It talked?!" Liselotte was dumbfounded by the sight of Alphonse speaking humanlike words.

Celia nodded with her eyes wide, still maintaining the barrier of magic essence around them. "Y-Yes, it certainly seemed like that..."

"Get her!" Alphonse ordered the revenants.

"Gragh!" The pale black revenants all attacked Aishia at once.

"Kshaah?!"

However, they couldn't get near Aishia. She spun the short spear in circles, freely repelling the approaching revenants with the sharp spearhead.

"Guh..." The revenants had tough skin, but even they could take damage from physically enhanced fighters and their deadly weapons. There was no way for them to block all the damage of Aishia and her spirit arts-enhanced body, swinging her spear.

With light footsteps, Aishia slipped through the gaps between the revenants while brandishing her spear freely. Her movements were like a mystical dance.

"Graagh, gah?!" The number of revenants was decreasing rapidly.

"Next," Aishia muttered each time she eliminated another

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

revenant. The revenants couldn't even lay a finger on her during her merciless and beautiful dance with the spear.

"Gah! Enough! I'll do it! You lot. Attack. The others!" Alphonse ran out of patience, bursting into a run with annoyance. He made a beeline towards Aishia, but she'd closed in on Alphonse before he realized it.

"Shut up."

Beating him to a counterattack, she thrust the spear through Alphonse's heart. However, being that he was a perfect specimen, Alphonse's life didn't end simply by having his heart pierced.

"Guh, no... way... Wait!" Alphonse's mouth twisted in a grin, pulling the spear out of his heart and hugging Aishia with all the strength he had.

"What a nuisance." Aishia quietly stepped backwards and slashed the spear sideways with all her might. Alphonse's head immediately went flying.

"...?" Alphonse was surprised at how the scenery suddenly changed, eyes widening in wonder. But when he spotted his headless body below him, he opened his mouth and spat out his final words. "Kuh... ngaah!"

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, as the battle between Aishia and Alphonse began, Rio was in hot pursuit of the fleeing Lucius. By using his wind spirit arts to forcefully accelerate his body, he left the estate in a matter of seconds.

That man ran with his physical abilities enchanted. There should be traces of magic essence along the route he had taken. While normally such traces would be easily missed, Rio focused his mind and was able to detect those remnants.

"Found it," he said, leaping high into the air.

"...Over there." Far below his eyes, he spotted Lucius

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

pushing his way forward while carrying Flora. His face wasn't visible under the hood, but he was running straight along the rooftops. The time was already long past dawn, the rising sun shining blindingly behind the man's back.

He's fast. It must not be a simple physical ability enhancement after all. If he keeps going that way, he'll hit the outer wall of the city. Is he going to run into the forest to the west?

At this rate, Lucius was probably under a minute away from leaving the city. Rio estimated the direction that Lucius was headed.

I'll catch up to him as soon as he leaves the city. He manipulated his wind spirit arts to accelerate himself as he descended.

◇ ◇ ◇

Less than a minute later, Rio caught up to Lucius past the wall, exactly as he had predicted. Lucius came to a sudden stop at an open piece of land near the city walls and turned to face Rio.

"I didn't expect anyone could catch up to me in that situation. Well, no... I was hopeful, but..." His tone was rather pleased.

This voice really is... Rio clenched the fist holding his sword. Hearing it up close made it sound all the more familiar.

"...Hey, what are you all silent for? Say something." Lucius raised his brows in suspicion at Rio, who stood still and silently.

"...How about you remove that hood first?" Rio ordered in a low and sharp voice.

"Uh? Who do you think you're talking to? Didn't you come to save this princess?" Lucius purposefully lifted Flora off his shoulder and readjusted his hold on her, showing off his

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

advantage of having a hostage. Being carried backwards meant that Flora was facing the forest.

“Kya!” She seemed to be conscious, letting out a small shriek at having her position adjusted.

Is Princess Flora in the way? No… After making his promise to Liselotte, he couldn’t simply abandon Flora like that.

Better let him think she doesn’t have value as a hostage. Perfect. I’ll keep going with what I want, Rio thought, immediately discarding his hesitation.

“The one I have business with is you,” he stated quietly.

“…Huh?” Lucius cocked his head in suspicion.

“You’re Lucius, aren’t you?”

“…Oh?” When Rio called out his name, Lucius’ tone changed to one of deep curiosity.

“Take off your hood,” Rio ordered.

“Huh, I don’t like that. What would you do if I was the Lucius you think I am, anyway?” Lucius sneered, questioning Rio.

“I’d kill you,” Rio stated with no hesitation whatsoever.

“…Ha… Hahaha! That’s a funny thing to say. Hilarious!” Lucius laughed in honest delight.

He’s young, Lucius thought. *This must be the human contracted to that humanoid spirit, right? I don’t recognize him, but if he has a grudge against me, then we must have met somewhere before.* He observed Rio’s face closely from under his hood, thinking calmly.

“Fine, then.” Lucius said, stabbing his jet black sword into the ground. He then slowly proceeded to remove his hood, revealing his appearance. “Well? Am I the person you wanted me to be?” he asked with a wicked grin.

“…Yeah. I’ve been searching for you all this time,” Rio confirmed in a coolly detached voice.

“Oh? But you seem to be rather indifferent to that?”

“No, that’s not true. I most definitely want to kill you,” Rio

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

shook his head quietly. His tone was still as cold and detached as ever.

“Hah, then you have to lay yourself bare more! You came here to avenge yourself, no?” Lucius said in a somewhat displeased manner.

“I am laying myself bare. As long as I kill you, that’s all I need.” Rio replied solemnly.

“Heh, is that so? Well, damn. You must be one boring bastard. But still… I’ll make sure to have my fun!” Lucius sighed in exasperation before grabbing his sword and attacking Rio while still carrying Flora. Rio responded immediately, evading Lucius’ attack. He attempted to land a counterattack on Lucius with his blade, but Lucius used Flora as a shield.

“Guh…” Rio reflexively halted his sword in midair.

“Ha! Nice reflex! Shall we go further?” Lucius said, this time swinging his sword at Rio. An exchange of blows began between the two of them; it was Rio’s first experience fighting in a battle with a hostage being held.

This is difficult.

It was a tougher fight than he imagined it would be. By carrying Flora, Lucius’ movements were restricted, but he had been similarly been able to restrict Rio’s attacks by using her as a shield.

However, the same applied for Lucius. He wasn’t able to land any attacks on Rio because of how he was carrying Flora, causing them to end up in a complete stalemate.

“Hahaha, is this princess important to you? Or do you just want to avoid getting innocent people involved in your revenge? Either way, you’re one naive bastard!” Lucius sneered as he crossed swords. Contrary to the cold way he was observing Rio, his emotions were beginning to fire up with excitement.

There’ll be no end to this at this rate. I’ve pretty much figured out our difference in ability, but he’s a weird one. I

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

wouldn't have forgotten someone this strong. Lucius looked back on his memory, trying to identify the person before him. But no matter how much he looked at Rio's face, he couldn't remember.

...No good, not happening. I can't remember at all. Or rather, I don't have any memory of meeting a guy like this... Which means I must have met him while he was still a bratty kid. Lucius clicked his tongue and thought about what would be the most interesting approach if that were the case.

After a moment, Lucius backed away from Rio temporarily, lowering his sword. "Stop — I'm done with this. Fighting like this is no fun at all."

"..." Rio himself considered how Flora was currently in the way and lowered his sword.

"It's about time you told me your secret. Unfortunately, I've incurred a lot of enmity over my life, so I don't bother remembering each and every face I deal with. But I've got an interest in you. Having you know me, while I have no idea who you are, isn't fun at all," Lucius said.

"If you don't remember, then it just means I wasn't that important to you," Rio replied, not bothering to answer properly.

"Cut the bullshit. A sword hand like yours would definitely leave an impression in my memory," Lucius provoked.

"Ah, is that so?" But Rio still didn't answer. He had no intention of earnestly giving away the information being sought while Flora was still a hostage. There was the fear that the moment he told him, Flora's use as a hostage would be maximized.

"...Tch, I hate stuck-up brats like you. How would you feel if I added this princess to the list of casualties?" Lucius clicked his tongue in annoyance and held his sword against the legs of Flora, who he was carrying.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Anh…” Flora’s body shook with a flinch.

“I can’t imagine you’d harm her after going through all the trouble of abducting her,” Rio said unwaveringly to Lucius’ threat.

“…Hah, you sure have guts. She is valuable negotiation material, after all. Well, whatever. If I have no recognition of you right now, that means I met you when you were still a brat, right?” Lucius could tell his threat had no effect and immediately changed his approach.

“…”

“There you go with your silence again. But I’ll take your silence as agreement, yeah? I get a strange feeling when I look at your face, but I just can’t place it. You’re not from the kingdoms around here, right?”

“…” Rio didn’t answer.

Lucius frowned in annoyance. “Tch, you’re really getting on my nerves now. All right, let’s make a bargain. I’ll release this princess for now. In return, you tell me your identity, then have a one-on-one match with me. I’ll turn the tables on the avenger.” It was a rather advantageous condition for Rio, which Lucius had confidence in.

As long as she’s within sight, I can still use her as a hostage without the hindrance. Which way it plays out comes after I confirm this guy’s origin. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be fun. Lucius had confidence. Even if he had a serious match with Rio, he wouldn’t be the one to lose. His mouth was turned up in a fearless grin.

“…” Rio stared fixedly at Lucius, doubt in his eyes.

“Hey, hey. Aren’t you a bit too scared? Fine. How about this: if you accept my terms, I’ll let the princess go first,” Lucius offered, yet another beneficial condition to Rio.

Rio hesitated for a moment, but soon nodded quietly. “…All right.”

“Then it’s a done deal. Here ya go!” Lucius threw Flora roughly against the ground.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Ugh…” Flora let out a soft groan.

“Yo, princess. Make sure you stand in the middle, where I can see you, yeah? Otherwise, more monsters might appear near you. Same goes for you. Don’t even think about approaching the princess.” Lucius gave a blunt warning to Flora before doing the same to Rio.

“Auh…” Flora was wholly afraid. And yet, when she finally spotted Haruto, she was filled with surprise. She twisted her face tearfully.

“Stand back a little more,” Rio said to Flora a little uncomfortably.

“O-Okay.” Flora nodded earnestly, staggering away from the two of them. From that moment onward, Rio and Lucius’ relationship completely changed from that of a hostage rescue to an avenger and his target.

“I stuck to my conditions. Now speak,” Lucius ordered sharply.

“…It was over ten years ago. I lived in the capital of Beltrum Kingdom,” Rio said slowly. Telling him the answer could possibly reveal his past to Flora, but this was a once in a lifetime opportunity he couldn’t pass up. Rio had lived his whole life for this moment.

He yearned for it.

Even if it was an illogical act, he wanted to settle his feelings of his past by getting his revenge on the man before him. In order to do that, he had to make sure Lucius was aware of who he was before he killed him.

“…Oh?” Lucius hummed with deep interest. That one sentence revealed a lot of information. Meanwhile, Flora’s eyes widened when she heard Rio had lived in the same land as her.

“At that time, you had your eyes set on a certain parent and child,” Rio continued solemnly. His words finally made something dawn on Lucius.

“Ha. Haha! Ha! I see, so your face was from Yagumo!

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Your hair color was so different, I couldn't recall at all! Isn't that right?!" Lucius laughed loudly, his expression exhilarated.

"..." The flames of Rio's quiet revenge burned within him as he watched Lucius silently.

"Ha, no need to look at me so angrily. But I see, I see. So you're alive. No, you stayed alive for me. That snotty, powerless brat." Lucius quirked his lips in a sadistic grin.

"It seems you remember now."

"Yeah, clear as day I do. I wanted to see you again too. After all, I spared the brat back then because I desired a moment like this."

"..." He really was an awful man, Rio thought, but he didn't let that thought show on his face. The feelings Rio had for Lucius were no longer in the realms of hatred or disgust.

That's why all he had was a keen, detached desire to kill. He wasn't pursuing a sense of satisfaction or accomplishment through his revenge. He didn't need any other feelings to carry out his personal act of revenge.

The moment he sought revenge, Rio's sense of reason overwhelmed him and scolded him for lowering himself to the same level as the man before him. He didn't want to live the same way as the person he condemned.

That was the answer Rio had reached before his parents' graves when he visited Yagumo. Rio had decided to move forward — to accept reality while reaching for the ideal. To try and remain pure while sometimes exposing the ugly side of himself. Even if such contradictory ideas made him a hypocrite, Rio would proceed down that path.

That's why it wasn't logical. It wasn't something like logic that drove Rio to kill Lucius... He just wanted to face his ugly self.

"I'm glad to see you grew up exactly as I wanted. If that's the case, then I'm finally getting excited too. This ain't bad." Lucius chuckled in delight.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

"...I'm also glad to see you were still the person I remember you as," Rio stated quietly.

"Hah, should I have reflected a little? Or maybe shown some regret?" Lucius questioned him in a provocative tone.

"I'm not seeking any repentance or remorse from you at all." Rio replied, not rising to Lucius' bait.

Tch, that's no fun at all. He could show a little less composure.

For Lucius, there was no greater pleasure than turning the tables on a would-be avenger. It was precisely because the other party acted on their emotions and instincts that he found joy in shutting them down with his own. The more intense his opponent's feelings, the spicier his life was.

...Which was why Lucius brought up the topic of Rio's parents. "...Is that so? Come to think of it, I'd heard from Zen before. That Ayame was originally a princess from some kingdom."

"Eh?" Flora was being completely ignored, but she was listening to Rio's conversation and understood the flow of the story. However, she was confused at the mention of royalty.

"Ayame was a good woman. A good meal indeed. She kept trying to protect you right up until she died. *Please don't kill Rio, I beg you,* she cried," Lucius said, sneering with terrible cynicism.

"..." Even Rio faintly furrowed his brow at that, tightening his grip on his sword.

"E-Eh...?" Flora had no idea what was going on anymore. The man Haruto had called Lucius had brought up the name Rio. Yes, he had used the word "you" to refer to Haruto, then said Rio with certainty... Which meant the similarities Flora saw between Haruto and Rio weren't just a figment of her imagination after all. But Haruto's hair was grey, the woman who was apparently his mother was royalty, and had gone through something so terrible...

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Everything that was said had been so shocking, Flora's mind had nearly gone blank. But the situation was changing with every moment, leaving Flora even further behind.

"Hah! You've got a better look on your face now." Lucius chuckled in satisfaction.

"...Is that all you have to say, then?" Rio asked quietly. Speaking anymore than this would just ruin his mood more. He'd already confirmed the necessary information, which meant there was only one thing left to do.

"Yeah, it's been roughly ten years, after all. I'll play with you again. Come at me." Lucius' mood was at its peak. He held his black sword ready in his right hand, pointing it at Rio provocatively. The signal for the start of the battle.

Without the shackles of Flora, Rio could release all of his power now.

"...Huh?" Rio disappeared from Lucius' view, making him freeze momentarily. At the same time, he was aware of his own body feeling off balance. His left half was lighter, to be precise. Something was flying through the air.

Rio was standing behind Lucius before he knew it, flicking his sword through the end of his swing. One beat later, something fell on the ground with a thump.

"Eh!" Lucius became aware of the fact that that *something* was his own left arm. "Play by yourself," Rio's chilling voice echoed.

◇ ◇ ◇

"W-What?" Lucius watched his own left arm roll across the floor and widened his eyes in shock. At the same time, his many years of combat experience made him reflexively turn to swing his sword at Rio behind him.

However, his slashing attack couldn't reach Rio's body; it sliced through the air in vain. Rio stepped back to increase the distance between them, watching Lucius with cold eyes.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Impossible. I couldn't react? Me, of all people...? Lucius forced down his shaken state and glared at Rio dangerously. He had definitely not lowered his guard and had made himself ready to respond to battle at any moment.

And yet, he had been taken by surprise. If he hadn't been holding his sword in front of him, it wouldn't have been a wonder if his head had been flying instead. At the taste of death, which was something he hadn't experienced in so long, Lucius felt an indescribable irritation run through him.

"Kuh!"

But at the same time, his head was thinking calmly for the reason as to why he lost sight of Rio.

"Tch?!" Rio closed in on him once more from head-on. This time, he was slower than before. He was still fast, but he was slow enough to respond to.

Still, Lucius was forced to react with a missing left arm. He blocked the sword Rio held in both hands with his sword only in his right hand.

"Guh..." Lucius sensed the overwhelming difference in physical strength and promptly took a step back to fend off the force. However, Rio reacted immediately and launched a counterattack.

So fast! Just how much essence does he have?! And what is that ridiculous strength enhancement?! Lucius was shaken quite a bit by the fountain of magic essence he felt flowing from Rio's body strengthening enhancement.

"Gah?!" Rio's leg stretched up like a sharp spear and struck Lucius precisely in the pit of his stomach. Lucius tried to jump back on the spur of the moment to weaken the force, but the abnormal amount of force sent him flying away.

"Hah...!"

Even then, Lucius rolled on the floor in a skilled defensive form and promptly stood up again.

Did he move with that ridiculous body enhancement the first time I lost sight of him? But he didn't release as much

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

essence just now. What's the trick to it?!

He tried to keep a level head. Rio was using wind spirit arts to accelerate his movements, but charging forward from head-on or moving around in tight spaces required him to control his acceleration to avoid collision. They were currently outside of the city, right by the woods. It was a tight space, but Lucius hadn't been able to figure out anything in such a short exchange.

In that time, Rio launched a counterattack. "Fuck you!" Lucius cursed.

With unparalleled precision and speed, Rio attacked Lucius. His movements were filled with a calm and cold murderous intent. Lucius barely managed to sidestep Rio's slash — Or so he thought, when suddenly the ground around Lucius rose like a spear, stabbing through his body. Lucius responded immediately and leaped towards the forest at his back.

Moments later, countless balls of light appeared around Rio. Rio lightly held his hand out at Lucius and the balls of lights all drew complex trajectories as they flew towards him.

"Tch!" Lucius clicked his tongue, shaking off the black bladed sword he had in his hand. A darkness rose from the blade and spread across the area, swallowing the balls of light closing in on him, Rio narrowed his eyes faintly at the sight before redirecting his hand at Lucius, who was still hovering midair. A cannonball-like shockwave shot out from his hand. The invisible blow struck Lucius' body with accuracy.

"I can see that, you know!" Lucius yelled, swinging his sword vertically downwards. Darkness rose from his sword once again, intercepting the shockwave. One beat later, Lucius landed on the ground.

"It's one thing after another..." The ground at his point of landing rose like a spear, protruding to stab through Lucius'

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

body once more. As Rio had scattered more balls of light in the skies above, that light was now falling down towards Lucius like rain. Lucius first swung his sword at the ground to deal with the attack coming at his feet; the slash of darkness cleanly sliced through the rising dirt spears. Next, Lucius tried to swing his sword at the light bullets in the sky, but the rain of light fell on Lucius at the same time he'd managed to swing his sword.

"Guh?!"

The darkness of his blade swallowed part of the light, but it couldn't eliminate all of the spheres. In fact, Rio fired even more of them, causing new light to rain continuously down on Lucius. The ground crumbled, creating a dust storm that rose around the older man.

"H-Heh..." Lucius blended in with the dust and withdrew from the scene before anyone realized. However, he had taken several of the light shots and was completely worn down all over his body. The balls of light Rio fired were each low in power, but they had enough force to damage the body through any strengthening enhancements. The damage to Lucius' internal organs was plentiful.

On top of that, a large volume of blood was still pouring out of Lucius' severed left arm; the blood loss was wearing him down, too.

And yet, Rio fired even more balls of light at Lucius.

"Tch!" Lucius clicked his tongue and forced his exhausted body to run in an attempt to evade the light.

W-What... is this fight... Flora watched the battle in a daze. Unfolding before her was a battle that far surpassed what she knew. She had seen many advanced battles between renowned swordsmen and sorcerers in matches held before royalty, but this made those seem like child's play.

...It's not magic. Is it some kind of artifact? Watching Rio's combat left Flora with such questions. A long-ranged

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

wave attack based on some form of sorcery was being used against Lucius right at this moment.

“Guh…” Lucius’ escape did not last for long. The moment his body screamed in protest and slowed, countless balls of light struck him and sent him rolling across the ground.

“Kkh… hnghh…” Lucius writhed, somehow managing to take a stance on one knee.

Damn it, my internal organs and ribs are done for. And I’ve lost too much blood… If I don’t reattach my arm… Lucius glanced over at his own left arm. While it wouldn’t be of any use for a while, there was a way to reattach it instantly.

“Kuh!” Rio spotted the direction of Lucius’ gaze and ran for it first, picking up the left arm that had been lying on the ground. He tossed it into the air and created an intensely raging fire that turned the left arm into ash.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“Aah…!” The tremendous heat wave washed over Flora, making her let out a little scream and turn her face away, unable to bear the heat.

“…Hah, you’re one nasty bastard.” Lucius glared at Rio with hatred.

“Not as much as you. Let’s finish this soon,” Rio said, closing in on him.

“Sure you don’t need to capture me alive?” Lucius asked in desperation. “Unfortunately, I received no such orders.” Rio shook his head without hesitation before accelerating, swinging his sword with the full intention to behead the heavily battered Lucius.

“…Guh!” Lucius wrung out the last of his strength to avoid the slicing attack. However, Rio had seen through the fact Lucius still had energy left and thrust his knee straight into Lucius’ face.

“Gah! Aaah!”

His knee struck right where Lucius’ left eye was; Rio had felt a certain resistance. Lucius rolled across the floor, yelling uncouthly as he felt the greatest pain he’d been in since this battle began.

He must have his physical body enhanced, because he really is unyielding. In order to end him for sure, I must… Rio pointed the tip of his sword right at where Lucius’ heart was, but Lucius shifted his body by the slightest amount, avoiding the direct stab to his heart. However, the sword pierced through his upper body.

He was practically at death’s door.

“Guh… hah…” Blood was pouring out of Lucius’ mouth.

“Stubborn ass. I’ll just have to wipe any trace of you from this world,” Rio said, pouring magic essence into his sword. An intense heat radiated from his sword, melting Lucius’ flesh.

“Guh…! Aaah!!” Lucius yelled, unable to endure the pain. The light of Rio’s blade grew stronger, expanding its area of

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

effect to melt the rest of Lucius' body.

"But you still... need to... protect the princess, right...?!" Lucius yelled, using the final dregs of his power. Holding the pitch black sword in his right hand, a small amount of darkness flowed out of the tip.

"No!" Rio reflexively withdrew his sword and moved to Flora in an instant, embracing her before leaping into the air.

"Kya?!" Flora gave a small scream. The place she had been standing a short moment ago was covered in darkness, from which the tip of Lucius' sword could be seen sticking out. If Rio hadn't saved her, Flora would have been pierced through.

"Hah, hah... hah..." Lucius endured the pain to give a wicked grin. He had lost his left arm, endured his left eye being crushed, and had large holes all throughout his body. Though he had enhanced his physical body, his wounds were so serious it was a wonder that he was still alive.

"Uhm... Ah." Flora realized that Rio had saved her and shuddered, shaking her body. She moved her hand in fear and flattened herself against Rio clingingly.

He's hanging on by a thread. Still holding Flora there, Rio slashed his sword down vertically. A slicing wind laced with essence immediately flew out of Rio's sword, closing in on Lucius crawling about the ground. However, the wind slash passed through where Lucius was lying and dispersed into the forest behind him, cutting down several trees along the way.

Lucius had changed locations at some point. "You're late, damn it..." He raised his head and muttered resentfully upon spotting the figure through the blurry vision of his right eye.

"What a mess this is. If only you didn't have that bizarre desire to play." Standing there was Reiss. Clad in his cloak with the hood covering his face, he held the severely wounded Lucius in his arms.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

“...I have business with that man.” Rio lowered Flora on the ground and addressed Reiss in a sharp voice.

“Unfortunately, I have business with him too.”

“I was here first.”

“No, no, no. You want to kill him, right? That means I won’t be able to finish my business, no?” Reiss stated nonchalantly.

“Then what will you do? Run away? Lucius, what about you? You going to run with your tail between your legs?” Rio taunted.

“...Hey, Reiss... Let go! I have... to kill him!” Enraged, Lucius spat out blood.

“Reiss?” Rio heard the name clearly.

“...That’s something I cannot do. The moment you undo your physical body enchantment, you’ll die. Even if you keep up the enchantment, your body will only last a few more minutes. There is no other choice but to withdraw here.” Reiss sighed as he spoke to Lucius, when a large number of light spheres floated in the air around them.

“Did you think I would let you run?” Rio poured a large amount of magic essence into his sword and called out to Reiss himself.

“Well, I do have some confidence in running and hiding my presence, after all. But who knows, against an opponent like you. There’s no telling until I try...” Despite the casual tone of voice Reiss took on, he observed Rio cautiously with a sharp look from under his hood. The blade of Rio’s sword was glowing with a dazzling light.

“...Here I go,” Reiss informed him with a chuckle. At the same time, Rio released a single blow to eliminate both men.

Haruto, above you! Suddenly, Aishia’s voice echoed in Rio’s head.

Rio turned his attention above him. “?!”

A pitch black flash was falling down to where Rio and Flora stood. Rio promptly changed the direction his sword

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

was aiming from Reiss to the flash in the sky above.

"Guh?!" A tremendous shockwave blew all over the area. It was the clash of the attack Rio had released and the falling flash of light.

"Ah! Aah...?!" Flora watched the spectacle in shock from behind Rio.

"Hide behind me!" Rio ordered Flora in a frightening tone, and Flora moved behind Rio's back in a panic. A few seconds passed like an eternity.

"Haaah!" Rio pushed back the black flash of light. A dazzling ray of light tore through the sky. However...

They're gone. At some point, Reiss had disappeared carrying Lucius. He looked around, but there was no sign of their presences. Even if he tried to search for traces of magic essence with spirit arts, the fight until now had scattered essence all over the place. He had no choice but to give up.

Rio looked up at the sky with a sharp glint in his eye. There, flying far in the skies to the west, he spotted a black dragon-like creature and immediately guessed that the attack just now had come from that.

Did that man call it here? When he considered why it attacked in such a convenient way for Reiss and Lucius, he couldn't help but feel suspicious. However, something like that hardly mattered to him right now.

They got away... Shit.

Rio grit his teeth with a shamed expression. With a wound that deep, there was a high chance he wouldn't survive. He had what would have normally been a fatal wound, and even if he survived, his body was damaged too much to ever fight again.

But it was unacceptable. That man would probably survive. Rio had no evidence, but he couldn't help but feel like *that* man would survive.

I'll kill him. I'll definitely find Lucius and kill him. As for Reiss... Rio felt a strong, bitter regret before he carved the

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

name of the person who could hold a clue into his mind.

"U-Umm…" Flora called out nervously from behind Rio.

"…" Rio silently turned back.

Despite being the one to call out, Flora didn't know what to say, moving her mouth without saying whatever she was trying to say.

"U-Umm… Sir R-Rio…" She grabbed onto Rio's sleeve imploringly, whispering his name.

"Yes." Rio nodded with a guilty look without averting his gaze from Flora.

Rio… That's right. I'm Rio. He reconfirmed who he was in his mind. Starting today and from tomorrow onwards, Rio would live as Rio. Nothing from this experience would change that. Rio couldn't become anyone other than Rio.

He would continue to live the path of Rio from tomorrow onward, despite the fact that it was a long, fruitless path in a battle with not his future, but his past.

However, a light shone on that gloomy road for him today, because he'd discovered that Lucius was alive. There was no need for pessimism. The empty road with no end he had been traveling on until now finally had a destination. There was no mistaking the path he had chosen. All that was left was to continue forward.

Rio slowly looked up at the sky and watched the bright dawn sunlight lead to tomorrow.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, far from Amande, in the underground of the Proxia Empire castle…

"Hnnghahh…" Lucius rolled on the floor as he spewed a large volume of blood from his mouth. But it wasn't just coming from his mouth — blood was also pouring from the area where his left arm was amputated. Furthermore, he had a large hole in his abdomen, which consequently covered his

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

whole body in blood.

Reiss looked down at Lucius with cold eyes. “Left eyeball ruptured, flesh gouged from abdomen to chest, left arm lost completely. In addition to the complex bone fractures throughout the whole body, the damage to your body is a little too severe. There’s no other choice.” He took out a giant gem from his chest pocket, its color a blood crimson.

“The incident this time should be a good lesson for you. I can’t have you dying on me, after all. Allow me to save you,” Reiss said, pushing the gem into the missing section of Lucius’ abdomen. Immediately, the gem melted away with an oozing sound, being absorbed by Lucius’ abdomen.

“Grah! F-Fuck! If — If I… had… my left arm… I could… have won!” Despite his face distorting with pain, Lucius bluffed insistently.

“…You’d have regained the strength to speak as soon as the healing process began. However, I doubt the result would have been any different even if you had your left arm. Give up. There is no way for you to win against him right now,” Reiss stated firmly, his face extremely exasperated.

“Guh…!” Humiliation and rage mixed in Lucius’ expression.

“But I have things to reflect upon myself this time. It seems I underestimated his abilities a little too much. Honestly, I’m at a loss for what to do. We can only accept our defeat quietly this time. In the future, we’ll have to put a hold on facing him alone. It would be best to avoid interfering,” Reiss said.

“W-What?!” Lucius’ expression was completely against it.

However, Reiss didn’t lend an ear to Lucius’ complaints. “I won’t let you object. You were the weak one this time, after all.”

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Epilogue

Just what time was it? And where was this place?

Miharu wondered vaguely in her drowsy consciousness.

“Miharu.” Someone called her name.

Ai-chan... Yes, it was Aishia’s voice.

Before she knew it, Aishia was standing before Miharu. Aishia stared at Miharu’s face closely. “Though it’s temporary, a connection between your soul and mine will be made because of the path formed. Is that all right?” she asked suddenly.

“Umm, is there a problem with having connected souls?” Miharu’s mouth moved regardless of her own will to confirm nervously.

Ah, this is a dream. From before we came to the village... Miharu became aware that she was within her own dream, vividly reliving a past event.

“Not particularly. Maybe the occasional empath moments?” Aishia answered with a tilt of her head.

“Empath?”

“Our minds may connect with each other.”

“Umm, what will happen when it does?” Miharu couldn’t quite picture it in her head and sought a more specific explanation.

“The other person’s mind and memories might be transmitted to you in some form. Like déjà vu. I’m able to intentionally create an empath effect if we’re in direct contact, but I can’t trigger it willingly from afar. It won’t happen often, either. And it’s uncontrollable. But it might happen when either one of us is feeling a strong emotion,” Aishia explained carefully for Miharu’s sake. While one

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

would normally feel creeped out and dislike it, Miharu showed no reluctance at all, accepting the temporary path with Aishia.

"That's fine. Use my magic essence until Haruto returns."

"…Okay, thank you," Aishia said.

Thus, this was how Miharu and Aishia formed their temporary path. But why was she having a dream about it now? Miharu pondered with her drowsy mind, but she didn't know. As she was thinking, her vision changed once more. A different dream seemed to be beginning.

Who is that? Miharu blinked in wonder. A black-haired mother and her similarly black-haired child of around five years old were happily walking in front of her with their hands linked. They seemed to be located in a city somewhere in Strahl.

"Hey, Mom. Why do you and I have black hair? We're the only ones different to the people around us." The boy asked his mother curiously.

"Well, you see, Rio. That's because your father and I came here from far away, I think." The mother answered the boy's question with a troubled face.

Rio? That's… Haruto? And Haruto's mother? She's beautiful… Once Miharu realized she was looking at a young Rio, she watched his mother in a daze.

"Do all the people who live far away have black hair?" Rio asked curiously.

"Yes, that's right. It's not just you and me. Your father's hair was black, your grandpa's hair was black, and your grandma's was as well," his mother answered with a gentle smile.

"Huh… I want to meet grandma and grandpa someday." Rio watched his mother's smile and grinned in return.

"…Let's see. I'll take you to meet them once you've grown up. They're in a place called the Yagumo region," his mother said with yet another troubled smile.

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

“Really? It’s a promise?”

Rio’s smile was too innocent to turn down. “Yup, it’s a promise.” The woman gave a motherly smile and nodded with a voice filled with affection. It was a warm, beautiful day in the life of a parent and child.

However, Miharu’s vision changed once again. There, the mother who had been holding Rio’s hand and walking mere moments ago, was being pinned down face-up by a well-built man.

“Hey Rio, are you frustrated?” The man sneered with a chilling grin, his weapon pierced through the mother’s body. Young Rio cowered and cried as he reached for his mother in a daze.

Uh… Miharu couldn’t help but avert her gaze from the scene.

Suddenly, a grown-up Rio stood right beside her. His hair was grey and he was wearing the outfit Miharu was used to seeing him in. Rio had his sword grasped tightly in his hand as he stared fixedly at the gruesome scene.

Ah, H-Haruto… He shouldn’t look, Miharu thought, but her mouth wouldn’t open.

Rio paid no attention to Miharu’s presence, merely watching the tragedy with a terribly cold gaze. After a moment, Rio started walking towards the man.

Miharu couldn’t tear her eyes away. She knew immediately what Rio was trying to do. In the next moment, Rio cut the man’s head off without a moment of hesitation.

Ah! That was where Miharu’s mind went drowsy again. Her consciousness was rapidly fading. When she opened her eyes in the morning, she might lose her memories of the dream.

N-No, I can’t. Don’t wake up… Miharu didn’t want to know such a sad story, but she didn’t want to forget, either. Her memory of this dream was something she thought shouldn’t be forgotten. She thought it was something she

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

should look at straight-on, no matter how painful it was. Scared, sad, frustrated, and helpless, Miharu couldn't do anything but embrace the Rio in her dreams.

Her heart hurt… But that was when the door to her memories slammed shut heavily. Miharu's mind finally faded away…

And dawn broke.

『fb.com/JNovelCodex』

Afterword

Everyone, I am most grateful to you all. This is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, Vol. 7 — Daybreak Rondo*.

Now, for some unfortunate news that I have already reported on the web novel. The manga version of *Seirei Gensouki* that began serialization in September last year has ended at chapter 3 due to the illustrator tenkla falling ill. I pray for tenkla's recovery as soon as possible. Thank you very much for the wonderful manga adaptation.

Note that the manga version of *Seirei Gensouki* is not ending forever, but will be resuming at some point in time. Please wait for updates regarding this.

Finally, running alongside the release of this volume is the Twitter character popularity poll and campaign to read a limited novel of *Seirei Gensouki*. I hope you will all participate.

That will be all for now.

Until next time.

End of February 2017, Yuri Kitayama

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Bonus Short Stories

Because I'm Drowsy

One sunny morning, before Rio had taken Celia to deliver the letter to Count Claire's residence…

Rio, Aishia, and Celia were sleeping side by side in the giant bed of the stone house as per usual. However —

"Mm. Mrgh…"

Celia suddenly woke up. Her former dedication to her research meant that her sleep pattern was disrupted often, which made her a light sleeper that was used to waking up after a short amount of sleep. Celia sat up slowly, looking around the room with a drowsy look. Rio was sleeping beside her, and Aishia was sleeping beside him. Aishia was clinging to Rio's arm, breathing peacefully in her deep sleep.

"Mmm…"

Aishia suddenly stirred. Then, something squished against Rio's arm.

"…"

Celia watched the scene while still half asleep. After a moment, she slowly looked down at her own chest. Another moment later, she looked back at Aishia's chest.

Squeeze, squeeze. Squish, squish.

It wasn't enough. It was admittedly soft to touch, but there was still something squishy missing.

"Hmph…"

Celia was still half asleep, but she pouted in frustration. She was used to being sleep deprived, but both her mind and body weren't rested enough, so she snuggled into the

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

blankets once more. Spurred on by Aishia, she boldly pressed herself close to Rio… As a result, Rio was sandwiched between Aishia and Celia.

“…”

When something soft from Celia’s side squished against his arm, Rio faintly stiffened. But the drowsy Celia paid no attention to that and continued to cling to Rio innocently. It was something she would never do on a regular day.

“…”

Aishia clung closer to Rio, as though competing with Celia.

“……”

Rio was completely frozen with his eyes closed. With Celia in a sleepy daze and Aishia unconsciously clinging to him, he had nowhere to go. He was perfectly restrained. In the end, Rio remained frozen between the two clinging girls for nearly an hour.

D-Did you see?

While Rio was interfering with Celia’s wedding ceremony in Strahl, shortly after Miharu and the others were taken to the spirit village…

Is it morning? Miharu suddenly woke up. She had stayed up late studying, so she was rather tired. However, she suppressed her sleepiness and rose from bed to fulfill her breakfast duties.

What should I make today? Miharu pondered drowsily as she took off her sleeping gown. Once she was down to her underwear, she picked out a change of clothes from the drawer and placed it on her bed. After taking off the bra she wore while sleeping to change into her everyday bra, she put on her clothes with familiar movements.

Okay, I’m ready! …Huh? What’s that nice smell?

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Miharu sniffed, nose twitching at the faint scent of cooking.

Is that Haruto or Orphia? I should help too.

Miharu hurried to leave the room, but someone knocked on the door first. Caught off guard, Miharu responded reflexively. “Ah, yes?”

“Miharu, I came to call you for breakfast.” Rio was on the other side.

“…Huh? Ah, did I sleep in? I’m sorry!” Miharu opened the door in a panic, bowing her head at Rio.

“It’s fine. I sleep in sometimes too. Don’t worry about it…” Rio replied with a faint smile. When he spotted the bra left on the bed behind Miharu, he averted his eyes awkwardly.

“Haruto?” Miharu tilted her head curiously.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. I’ll be waiting, then.” With that, Rio departed with haste.

“Yes? I’ll be right there too.” Miharu was curious as to why Rio averted his gaze and turned back. Then —

“?!”

She spotted her own discarded bra. It was in full view from the door, folded neatly on top of her nightgown. She was the one who had put it there, after all.

D-Did he see it? Miharu’s face reddened by the minute. Afterward, while they were eating breakfast, Rio and Miharu averted their eyes from each other in embarrassment the entire time.

Elemental☆Element, Teacher?

In the middle of spring in Japan, Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharu were childhood friends that just started their second year of high school this spring.

It was morning, just before homeroom. Today was the day of the opening ceremony, and everyone was excited about the class shuffle, leaving the classrooms bustling with lively

conversation. Among them were Haruto and Miharu.

“Looks like we’re in the same class this year, Haru-kun,” Miharu said happily as she took the seat next to Haruto.

“So it seems,” Haruto replied to Miharu awkwardly.

The two were in different classes during their first year, but they would be in the same class from today onwards. And on top of that, they were seat neighbors.

Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharu. In their high school, seat numbers were assigned by gender in order of family name, so it was only natural for the two of them to be given the same seat number. As a result, it was inevitable for the two of them to be seated beside each other. Even if the seat numbers had been decided by birthdate, the two were both born in spring and would have been given the same seat numbers anyway.

They’d been separated for a long time, but after reuniting a year ago, they couldn’t help but feel like fate was working for them.

“Let’s get along this year, Haru-kun,” Miharu said to Haruto with wholehearted happiness in her tone.

“Agreed,” Haruto replied, still a little awkward.

However, the two were a very attractive pair that stood out within the class.

“Ah, I wonder if those two are dating. I can’t believe this is happening after I’m finally placed in the same class as Ayase…”

The male students all sighed together. Meanwhile —

“Aww, I’m finally in the same class as Amakawa, but I’m no match for Ayase. I can’t believe this…”

The female students all sighed, too. However —

“Hey hey, it’s too early to be disappointed, guys. Didn’t you see who our teacher is? It’s Professor Celia,” one of the male students said to the others.

“Seriously?!” The boys all regained their vigor immediately.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Celia Claire was the lecturer that transferred to their high school from overseas last year. Her adorable looks that made her appear younger than everyone made her highly popular among both boys and girls. As they gossiped about Celia, the door to the classroom opened.

“Ooh…!” the male students all cheered at once.

It was Celia who had entered. However, as it was still early in the morning, she seemed rather lethargic. But despite that, the male students paid no attention to Celia’s exhaustion, caught in their own excitement.

“We still have Professor Celia!”

“What are you all talking about?” Celia replied tiredly to the boys as she stood at the teacher’s desk. “Oh well. I’m going to introduce you to someone, though she’ll be officially introduced later at the entrance ceremony. Come in, Aishia.”

With a heavy sigh, she called down the hallway. A peach-haired girl appeared in the open doorway.

“…” The students were all captivated by the beauty of the girl and gulped in shock.

Celia grimaced at the reaction of the students. “Aishia, introduce yourself,” she urged.

“I’m Aishia,” Aishia said, offering only her name.

“That isn’t an introduction…” Celia placed a hand against her face in clear exhaustion. But Aishia paid no heed to her, glancing around the classroom instead. Her gaze stopped on Haruto.

“…There you are,” Aishia muttered, swiftly approaching Haruto.

“Huh?” Haruto looked taken aback in confusion.

“Aishia Amakawa. I’ll be with Haruto from today onwards. Wait for me after class; we’ll go home together.” Aishia suddenly said, shocking everyone in the room.

“Wha?!” Seated beside Haruto, Miharu was also speechless.

“Eeeeh?!”

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

The yells of the students echoed through the school.

To be continued… maybe?

I tried to dance!

At the village where the spirit folk live…

Just before supper, Latifa had shut herself alone in her room, sitting on a chair. Her chin was resting on her left arm as she held a pen in her right hand, hemming and hawing in the direction of her desk.

What kind of uniform would be cute, I wonder?

She was pondering over the design of her own uniform. She had decided to make a uniform after seeing Miharu and Aki's Japanese school uniforms earlier today. Having died as a primary school student, Latifa — no, Suzune — admired the uniforms middle school and high school students wore. Unable to suppress her impatience, she took out her writing tools in an attempt to come up with her own design, but…

What kind of uniform would Onii-chan like?

She was having trouble coming up with anything specific. Designing wasn't an easy task for an amateur to begin with.

"Mmrgh…" Latifa groaned.

While Miharu and Orphia would be the ones making the uniform, she couldn't just leave everything to them if she wanted to surprise Rio. She at least wanted to come up with her own ideas.

What would Onii-chan say if he saw me in a uniform? Would he call me cute?

Latifa giggled with a smile. "Cute." If she could hear that one word from Rio, she would ecstatic. Simply imagining it was enough to make her happy.

Hmm, but just wearing a uniform seems a little boring… no? What if I danced or something as well? Latifa suddenly

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

thought to herself, tilting her head.

"...I wonder what kind of dance would be good?"

She stood up and imagined herself wearing a uniform. Her room had plenty of empty space, so she stood in the middle of an open area.

"Like this, perhaps?" Latifa shyly took a step. Eventually, she realized she needed to move her hands too and added to the choreography. She started having more and more fun as time passed.

"One, two. One, two." Latifa danced in a fairly convincing way, taking light steps and moving her limbs rhythmically.

"Hmm hm hmm..." She started humming along. She was excited about it, so the choreography ideas came to her one after another too.

Should I think of some lyrics too? Latifa wondered, but lyrics didn't come to her so easily. She took several moments to wonder what would be good. Perhaps it would be best to express her feelings honestly. Which meant —

"'I love you, Onii-chan'?"

That was it. Before she knew it, her mouth was moving naturally. Then, at the most climactic moment, she spun around and made her final pose. Since she was a werefox, she emphasized her fox side with rhythmic fox-like hops. Latifa's gaze suddenly moved to the door. Come to think of it, she had left it wide open. In the doorway stood a frozen Miharu.

"Wait, Miharu?!" Latifa's body shook with a flinch.

"Ah, s-sorry. I heard you humming and your door was open so I tried calling out to you a few times, but there was no reply..." Miharu apologized in a fluster.

"W-Were you watching?" Latifa asked with a bright red face.

"U-Umm. Just the final part," Miharu hesitantly confirmed.

"Mwuuuh!"

〖fb.com/JNovelCodex〗

Latifa hid her face behind her hands and crouched down on the spot. She was so embarrassed, her face felt like it was on fire.

“I-I’m sorry.” Miharu ran over to Latifa in a panic and held up her body.

“…It’s not your fault, Miharu. I was the one who left my door open. Uugh, but I’m still so embarrassed!” Latifa groaned in agony. She was so absorbed in her thoughts about Rio that she hadn’t noticed anything around her at all. She had some serious reflecting to do…

“I-It was really cute, though,” Miharu offered honestly, trying to cheer Latifa up.

“…T-Thanks. By the way, what did you need, Miharu?” Latifa’s fox ears twitched as she asked shyly.

“Oh. I came to call you, since the food will be ready soon…”

“…Got it. This is a secret between the two of us, okay, Miharu?”

“Yup, I know.” Miharu nodded with a faintly strained smile. She wasn’t a big gossiper to begin with.

“…If you tell anyone, I’ll have you dance with me in front of Onii-chan. Got it?” Latifa pouted her lips in a sulk.

“E-Eeeh?! M-Me too?! No way!” Miharu shook her head reflexively.

“You’ll be fine if you don’t say anything.”

“I-I see. Right. That makes sense. Got it. Yup, okay.” Miharu nodded to convince herself.

“…It’s a promise, then. Let’s go.”

Latifa grinned gently and walked out of the room. Miharu giggled before bringing up the rear.

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

[fb.com/JNovelCodex]